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Roger Cardinal / Gwendolen Webster

Kurt Schwitters

HATJE CANTZ

"We, including his lovely and rare wife Helma, became friends instantly. His generous personality, his quick wit, his delightful sense of humour, his great tolerance, could not but endear him to all who came into contact with him. . . It is only when one realises the contempt that existed at that time for any form of life not exalted or decked in finery that we can estimate the power of his courage to demand respect for that which was discarded as rubbish." KATHERINE DREIER

"Irony was his startling stroke of lightning, laughter was his weapon. Here, too, in a Rabelaisian sense, was anchored the deep-seated humanity that radiated from him. Although his art was deeply rooted in his own time, it was also for him a powerful statement, universal, autonomous, a 'vox humana' that could embody the comedy and tragedy of human existence in visual and poetic form."
CAROLA GIEDION-WELCKER

"Generous and kindly he was, and it was a privilege to know such a man, forever experimenting."
HARRY PIERCE

"A person as complicated and paradoxical as Schwitters cannot be tackled in a few words. An artist through and through. Obsessed by art. Uninhibited in the use of his artistic materials as none other of his time. And at the same time his bourgeois, let's say petit-bourgeois, exterior was also genuine." HANNAH HÖCH

"There was never a dull moment when Kurt was around . . . In reality he himself was the total work of art."
HANS RICHTER

"Tall, blond and blue-eyed, he filled every room—of the house and of the mind—with his sparkling spirit and his captivating vitality. Within minutes one found oneself under the influence of this magician, who like a god tore apart the grey, stale clouds of convention, who swept away dusty concepts like shreds of mist and pitched solemn time-honoured order from its pedestal—not, however, with thunder and lightning, but with a gracious air and a joyful charm." ANNIE MÜLLER-WIDMANN

"He is a complicated clown; good-naturedness itself, with bright eyes like a child's. But don't let him refashion your delightful room in the style of Merz (his own invention!); he gets taken by such fancies. If he isn't wearing socks again, don't blame me." PAUL STEEGEMANN

"Kurt Schwitters will live on, in museums, in exhibitions, in encyclopaedias and in the analyses of researching art historians . . . but I have also realized that the Kurt Schwitters who will come alive then is different from the one we knew. He will live on, but it will be another Kurt Schwitters . . . His anarchism was that of the tumult of life that knows no borders." HANS FREUDENTHAL

". . . one of the oddest people I have ever met . . . "
RICHARD HUELSENBECK

"It needs a poet like Schwitters to show us that unobserved elements of beauty are strewn and spread all around us and we can find them everywhere, in the portentous as well as in the insignificant, if only we care to look." NAUM GABO

". . . lazy . . . " ELEONORE FISCHER (Kurt's mother-in-law)

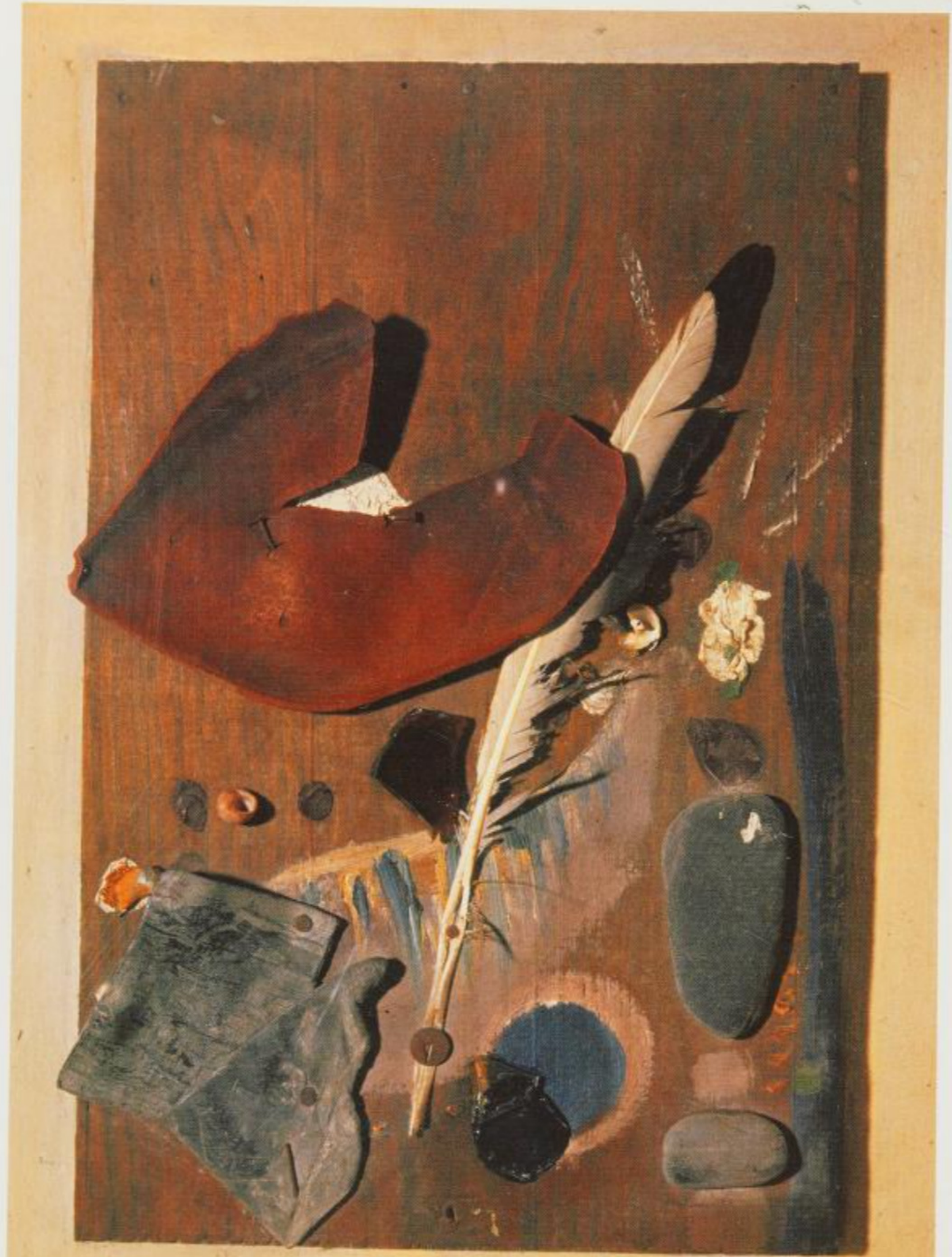
"In Hanover, Kurt Schwitters (celebrated for a poem rendering the sound made by a sneezing man with a stammer, considered by his admirers to set him somewhat beyond Shakespeare), established a Dadaism of his own which he called Merz. The word, true to the main principle of the movement, had no meaning whatsoever."
WILLIAM GAUNT

"Kurt Schwitters of Lysaker and Ambleside was able to put down his roots in new countries and be at home after a short while because he was always at home within himself wherever he unpacked his tools and wherever he put his glue pot on the hearth." KATE STEINITZ

"The nature of Schwitters's work changed hardly at all up to the day of his death; it never lost its freshness, unpretentiousness, nor perfection of scale." ROBERT MOTHERWELL

"Of all the [Bauhaus] guest performers, the most outstanding was Kurt Schwitters with his *Ursonate* or as the presenter of a solo one-acter [one-act play] in which he would vary the only text "I keep-eep my sheep-eep" for so long that despite his Sunday blue suit, everyone could plainly see not only the shepherd but also the sheep on stage." XANTI SCHAWINSKY

"Behind this maker of miniatures there obviously lurked a megalomaniac trash collector ready to cart off everything in sight . . . Everything was grist for the mill."
JOHN ELDERFIELD



Symphony for a poet, 1940

Roger Cardinal / Gwendolen Webster

Kurt Schwitters

HATJE CANTZ

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Abbreviations

OS Individual artworks by Schwitters are identified by the formula "OS + catalogue number." Edited by Karin Orchard and Isabel Schulz, the catalogue is the three-volume *Kurt Schwitters: Catalogue Raisonné* [I: 1905–1922; II: 1923–1936; III: 1937–1948], published by Hatje Cantz in Ostfildern-Ruit in 2000, 2003, and 2006.

Lach Quotations from Schwitters's literary writings are taken from the five volumes of *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk*, edited by Friedhelm Lach, published by DuMont Literatur und Kunst Verlag from 1973 through 1981. Example: the formula "Lach 5, p. 355" in parentheses in the text indicates a quotation from page 355 of the fifth volume.

Nündel Quotations from Schwitters's correspondence are taken from the single volume *Kurt Schwitters: Wir spielen, bis uns der Tod abholt: Briefe aus fünf Jahrzehnten*, selected by Ernst Nündel and published in Frankfurt am Rhein and Berlin by Ullstein in 1986. Example: the formula "Nündel, p. 282" in parentheses indicates a quotation from page 282 of this book.

Glossary

Bauhaus a college of art and design, founded in Weimar in 1919, which sought to unite all the arts. From 1923 on, it fostered the so-called Bauhaus style of functionalism aimed at a mass market. Regarded as a radical institution, the college was forced for political reasons to move from Weimar to Dessau and finally to Berlin, where it closed in 1933. The Bauhaus exerted a lasting influence on Modernist architecture and design.

concrete poem a poem in which the purely visual impact of its lettering is the key determinant of its meaning

Constructivism an international movement or stylistic tendency, originating in post-revolutionary Russia, which attracted many avant-gardists across Europe, especially in the interwar years. It was generally tied to an ideal of social betterment whereby new art forms were conceived as structuring a new social order. Stylistically, it rejected traditional figurative imagery in favor of an abstract formalism, typically confined to austere geometric shapes and often manifested in such materials as plastic, glass, and sheet metal.

Dada the nonsensical neologism used as a rallying cry by Dadaist groups active in several cities, above all Zurich, Berlin, and Paris. The different groups had fluctuating agendas, though all were marked by rebelliousness and a taste for noisy provocation. The movement's lack of strict definition encouraged creative versatility and, belying its apparent nihilism, led to some remarkable artistic achievements, not least in the development of techniques such as collage, assemblage, and photomontage.

Gesamtkunstwerk (German) a comprehensive artwork that seeks an ideal integration of separate art forms

i-drawing (German, invented term) a work consisting of found printed material, typically soiled papers from the printshop, which the artist refrains from amending

Merz a neologism chosen by Schwitters to designate his personal strategy as a creator in several media. He invoked it widely through most of his career, yet avoided any ultimate definition, all the while resisting its assimilation to the concept of Dada.

Merzbau (plural **Merzbauten**) (German, invented term) 'Merz-building'. Schwitters's term for a large sculptural/architectural installation

Merzbild (plural **Merzbilder**) (German, invented term) 'Merz-picture'. Schwitters's term for his assemblage pictures, largely constructed from junk materials

Merzrelief (German, invented term) 'Merz relief'. Schwitters's term for a three-dimensional work designed to be hung on the wall

Merzzeichnung (German, invented term) 'Merz-drawing'. Schwitters's term for his paper-based collages

palindrome a word or sentence which remains unchanged whether its sequence of letters be read straightforwardly or in reverse

readymade a functional object found in the everyday world and placed on display, unaltered, as an artwork. The term was first proposed and theorized by the Surrealist Marcel Duchamp.

Stempelzeichnung (German) 'rubber-stamp drawing'. Schwitters's term for a picture built up from imprints produced by office rubber-stamps

Introduction

There are many reasons why Kurt Schwitters might arouse our curiosity and admiration. Many see him as an artistic pioneer who set the pace for the European avant garde, making his fellow rebels look as if they were stumbling several yards behind him. The collages he produced throughout his career have become a legendary reference for Post-Modernism as an instance of the artistic practice of appropriation. The *Merzbau* he constructed in the family house in Hanover has been the subject of endless speculation ever since it was obliterated in a wartime air raid in 1943. Schwitters produced startling poems, and is cited as an outstanding contributor to the canon of Concrete Poetry, while his prose fictions have earned a place in German literary history for their impish fantasticality and sometimes piercing social insights.

Yet the same startling inventor also painted reassuring portraits, landscapes, and still lifes, and earned a living as a respectable businessman, running a successful advertising agency in his native town. Schwitters once joked that he was "[a] bourgeois and [an] idiot," as if to hide simultaneously behind two contrasting masks, that of a responsible citizen and that of a self-proclaimed fool or lunatic, absolved from all responsibility or requirement to conform. But such contradiction and paradox were all part of a prodigious effort of camouflage, keeping the world at bay for just long enough to make his mark. An unusual versatility of expression and a genius for adapting to circumstance were indeed Schwitters's secret resources; they helped him to maintain an enviable momentum on his lifetime's journey through art (fig. 1).

Some commentators have deprecated Schwitters's reticence and lack of animosity; Richard Huelsenbeck made the memorable sneer that he was the Caspar David Friedrich of the Dada Revolution, i.e., an outdated and soft-skinned Romantic. Compared to the militant Dadaist groups of Berlin, Zurich, and Paris, he was a solitary bourgeois provincialist whose pranks and protests were of only local resonance. Among the suave Constructivists, he cut the figure of a somewhat messy dissident, even though he was a tenacious defender of the view that Abstraction is as crucial an undertaking as any other in modern culture. Schwitters was like a chameleon whose appearance adapts to each new setting, yet he always managed to catch the light and register a distinctive imprint.

As one of modern art's greatest innovators, his output was enormous, for, escaping any single clear cut category, he manifested himself as a master of diversity. He made collages and assemblages, he published poems and manifestos, he wrote about aesthetics and about typography. Now he was a clown who raised laughter through his performances, now he was an earnest polemicist and rebel. Defying simplistic definitions, he transcends the miscellany of artistic options that characterized his troubled epoch, and emerges for us as a paradigmatic jack of all trades whose career remains of keen relevance to the continuing concerns of art. This book seeks to clarify and appraise Schwitters's prolix cultural contributions and to elicit a consistency underlying his diverse expressions.

Merz

To grasp Schwitters, one must first try to grasp his concept of Merz. The classic account of the origins of the term tends to foreground the element of chance. Schwitters tells of coming across an isolated syllable during the making of a collage. One day in early 1919, a printed scrap referring to the *Kommerz- und Privatbank* happened to enter the space of a collage and was at once adopted by its discoverer as the infinitesimal yet grandiloquent sign of an entire process and project. The neologism *Merz* implies its homonym *März*, the month of March, with its associations of springtime and regeneration. Equally it alludes to the German verb *ausmerzen*—to eradicate—so that it immediately marks a paradoxical twinning of contrary endeavors. As we shall see, Schwitters's practice of collage-making involves both tearing things asunder *and* redisposing the fragments within a fresh compositional order. Other associations, triggered by rhyme, are *Scherz* (joke), *Herz* (heart), and *Schmerz* (pain). Schwitters always loved word play, and once took the popular phrase "Aller Anfang ist schwer" (every beginning is hard) and turned it into "Aller Anfang ist Merz" (every beginning is Merz), whereby the syllable *Merz* carries the tacit shadow sound *Sch*, which is the first element of his own surname. A collage from 1926, entitled *Sch*, appropriates part of an advertisement for the tonic-water manufacturer Schweppes as a cypher hinting at his pretentions to be an artist of effervescence (fig. 128). Not least

1 *Untitled (With an Early Portrait of Kurt Schwitters)*, 1937–38

2 *Merz Picture 9 b The Great I Picture / Merz Picture K 7*, 1919

among the virtues of the neologism was its rasping brevity, differentiating it from the looser, more infantile term *Dada*: for Schwitters would always contend that, despite his affinities with cosmopolitan Dadaism, he was running a solo enterprise whose aims ran at a tangent to those of the groups in Zurich, Berlin, or Paris.

Of course, the linguistic field is but one part of the wider associative domain determined by, or reflected in, Schwitters's repeated invocation of this precious phoneme, at once a bewildering battle cry and the password to a whole lexicon of fresh meanings. As a creative strategy or program, Merz meant not just toying with sounds and their semantic shadings, but an entirely serious implementation of impulses, hunches, accidents, and improvisations that gradually evolved into a set of private rules. The Merz stance involved maintaining a special focus upon expression, whether in the performance of a sound-poem or the improvisation of a fairy tale. Somehow Schwitters brought the same sense of purpose to his drawings, paintings, assemblages, sculptures, and creative writings as he did to his correspondence with friends, his treatise on typography, and his management of a publicity firm. Merz was never quite a fixed doctrine—which would have called for a formal definition, such as the Futurists and the Surrealists sought to establish in their passion for manifestos—but was always a recognizable cluster of insights, imaginings, preferences, and responses. Despite his tactical claim that art should avoid being dragged into a debate with contemporary politics, Schwitters always remained alert to the exigencies of his epoch, attending to the heartbeat of the moment and the open horizon of the future. By 1926, he was announcing that "for me, Merz has become a way of understanding the world [*eine Weltanschauung*]." (Lach 5, p. 248) It meant being conscious of standing at the very threshold of modernity and constructing innovative works that would bear the stamp of authority of a specific individual. For, as Schwitters himself declared, "I now call my own self MERZ." (Lach 5, p. 253; fig. 2)

The Life

> For I consider it of essential importance that at the end of one's life nothing should be lost, even if it was false or dull; one's aspirations should stand forth entire. For with our thousand weaknesses and the tiny spark of the ideal, we human beings can at best express ourselves openly and honestly, and work, in the ideal sense, towards ourselves. We cannot make ourselves into an ideal being. That ambition usually ends in hypocrisy. (Lach 5, p. 253)

Kurt Schwitters was born into the prosperous world of the nineteenth-century Hanover bourgeoisie, in the era of Imperial Prussia. He died sixty years later in England, poverty-stricken and almost forgotten in his native country. Schwitters had been a prominent figure in the Weimar Republic, a writer, poet, artist, sculptor, publicist, graphic designer, entertainer, and lecturer whose multifarious activities within the framework of the European avant-garde were unequalled by any of his contemporaries. Varied as his careers were, their origins can be traced to a single word of his own invention: Merz. In effect a one-man art movement, Merz rapidly expanded to the peripheries of the arts and beyond to become part of Schwitters's identity and thus inextricably bound up with the course of his life, from his spectacular debut as an avant-garde artist in 1919 to his heartbreaking years of exile in Norway and Britain. To the end of his days, it remained his guiding principle, even if the spirit of the age ultimately told against everything that Merz and its creator stood for.

The beginnings of Merz can be traced to a critical juncture in German history—the close of 1918 and the humiliating end of a war that the country had never envisaged losing. Yet as Schwitters recalled, he found this period exhilarating:

> Suddenly the glorious revolution was there. I think little of such revolutions; mankind must first be mature enough for them. It is like the wind shaking down unripe apples, such a shame. But with it came the end of the whole swindle that people call war . . . I felt myself free and had to shout out my joy into the world. For the sake of thrift I took whatever I found, for we were a destitute country. One can also cry out with bits of rubbish and that's what I did . . . everything was wrecked anyway and what counted was to construct something from the broken pieces. But that is Merz . . . It was a reflection of the revolution in me, not as it was, but as it should have been. (Lach 5, pp. 335–36)

Germany was indeed a broken country, for a land that had vaunted its people as the most honest, courageous, industrious, and best educated in Europe was on the verge of collapse. Yet Schwitters was not alone in his elation, for a fleeting sense of euphoria gripped the nation as different groups gained new momentum for their cause. Some prepared for a Communist revolution that would surely spread from Russia; some bragged that the Fatherland had never been beaten, for foreign troops had never reached German soil. Others rejoiced at the advent of long-awaited democracy and the departure of those who bore ultimate responsibility for the slaughter: Emperor Wilhelm II, who abdicated in November, and General Ludendorff, the architect of the war, who decamped abroad. Exhilaration turned to militancy as a series of volatile political confrontations culminated in a revolution that swept through the country. It was brought to a bloody end when the new Social Democrat government enlisted paramilitaries to crush the uprisings.

Schwitters's personal, peaceful rebellion found no echo in the havoc of revolution and the implacable post-war scramble for scapegoats. Accused of crass incompetence, Germany's former leaders railed against radicals for sabotaging the war effort—the myth of the perfidious "stab in the back" that was to become a crucial motif of Nazi ideology. Berlin, the capital of the most unstable country in Europe, was crippled by strikes and street brawls as different factions battled for control.

Given such insecurities, art was perceived as a fine investment, and Berlin's art dealers focused on promoting new names to draw attention to their exhibitions. Herwarth Walden (fig. 4), owner of the Sturm gallery and its publishing enterprise, located in the very heart of Berlin, was well versed in public relations, having provided

3 *Untitled (Portrait of Helma Schwitters)*, 1916

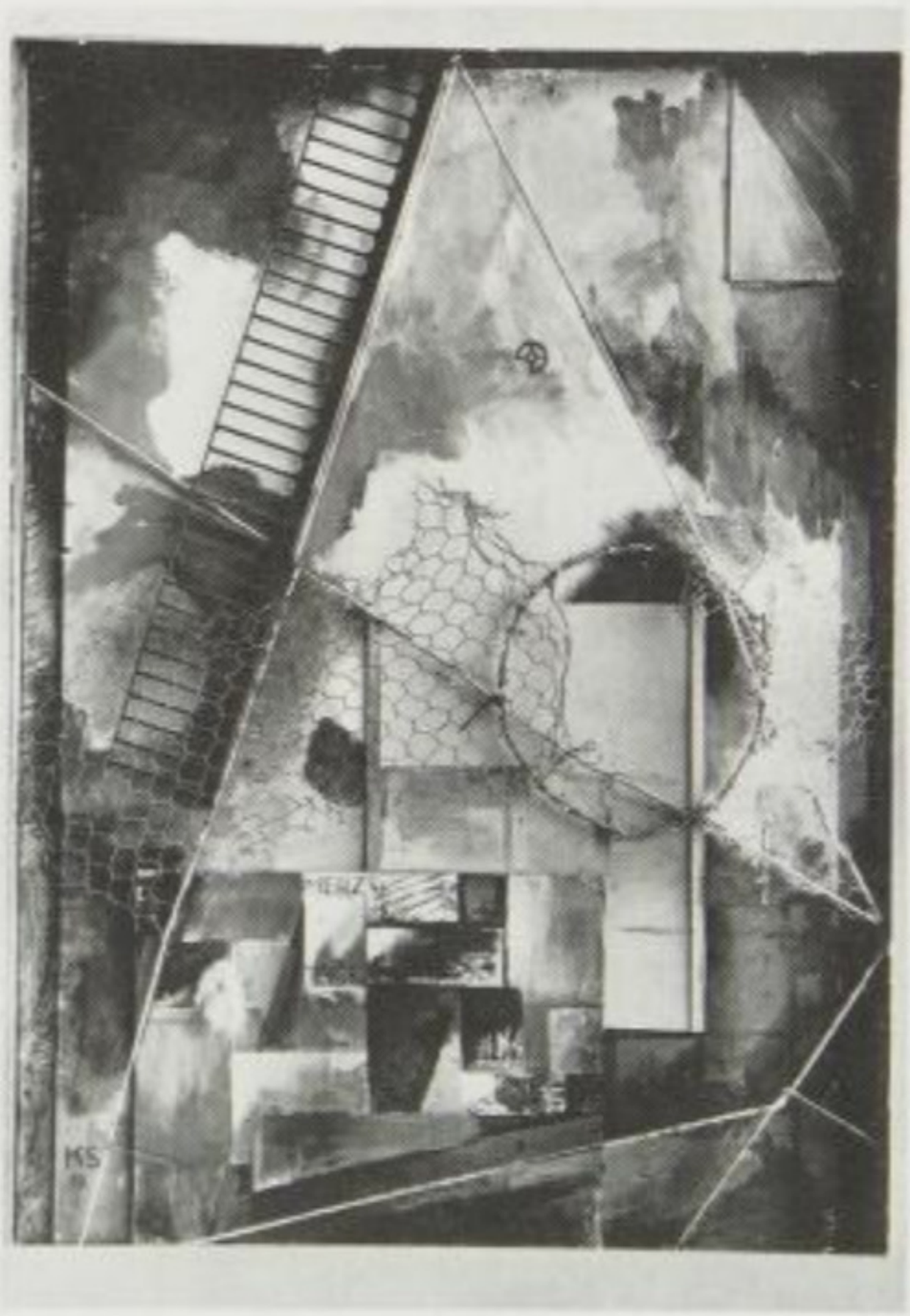
4 Herwarth Walden, around 1918

an outlet for some of the most contentious writers and artists of his time for almost a decade. For Walden there was no such thing as bad publicity, and he was therefore taking a calculated risk when, in the lawless months of mid-1919, he staged a show of remarkable works by his new protégé, a tall, gauche, virtually unknown provincial artist named Kurt Schwitters.

Since the winter of 1918, Schwitters had been experimenting with pictures made of scraps of rubbish, and in following year he began to number them under the title of Merz. This meaningless word, cut out of an advertisement for the Kommerz- und Privatbank, was part of an assemblage he made in about March 1919 (fig. 5), and he gave it his own definition: the combination of all conceivable materials for artistic purposes. Merz became the trademark of Sturm's summer exhibition and, as Walden anticipated, elicited incensed reactions from the press. The well-educated middle classes commonly expected visual art to supply them with an uplifting experience that bolstered their pride in their country and its people. Art was how the nation wished to see itself, and Schwitters's creations of scuffed paper and ragged refuse were condemned as a sinister, unpatriotic assault on a society seeking desperately to salvage the remnants of its self-esteem. Largely ignored until then, his name at last came to the attention of leading art critics, collectors, gallery owners, and museum directors. Merz, born of the tensions of a torn society, was subsequently to thrive on their perpetuation.

Early Life

The invention of Merz marked an entirely new departure for Schwitters in view of his conventional background. Born on June 20, 1887, in Rumannstrasse in Hanover, a garrison town and burgeoning industrial center in what was then Prussia, he was the only child of industrious parents who from humble beginnings had amassed a comfortable fortune from the proceeds of their fashion shop in the town center. His early years were uneventful. He was christened and confirmed in the Lutheran church and attended school in Hanover as a reserved and generally mediocre pupil. In 1901, at the family's country retreat, his own carefully-tended garden was destroyed before his eyes by local boys, and he experienced his first attack of epilepsy. With virtually no medication available for sufferers, he missed a year of school and passed the time by writing poetry, playing the piano, and painting, in an enforced isolation that resulted in bouts of depression. After leaving school in 1908 he enrolled at the college of applied arts in Hanover, where his successes were unremarkable—an award for a clay sculpture and



5 *I. Merz Picture 13 (The Merz Picture.)*, 1919

6 Eduard Schwitters, Kurt Schwitters's father, around 1924

an honorable mention for gravestone design. In the following year, he entered the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts in Dresden. By this time he was unofficially engaged to his second cousin Helma Fischer (fig. 3), born in 1890 and raised in a repressive bourgeois atmosphere that, unlike Kurt, she had inwardly resisted since her youth. Neither his engagement nor student life in the elegant Baroque town of Dresden improved Schwitters's melancholy leanings.

In autumn 1911, five of his student paintings were accepted for exhibition in Kunstverein Hannover, one of Germany's oldest and largest art societies. He became a regular contributor, and even found a benefactor in the elderly Leonard Körting, a keen amateur artist who took him on painting expeditions to Italy. With such public and private backing, his prospects seemed assured, yet as late as 1915 he was still registered at the Dresden academy, an assiduous, if hardly outstanding, student. Between 1910 and 1911 he had theorized protractedly on abstract art, and he later gave several explanations for this sudden interest, including the unlikely reason that "Professor Kühl in person sat on my palette in my studio . . . this inspired me to paint abstracts. The palette is split down the middle." (Lach 5, p. 241) On another occasion he described how he began to experiment with abstraction after perceiving what he called "the eternal laws of nature" on a solitary walking tour in winter. More probably, his concern with the abstract arose from his decision to apply to the more progressive Berlin academy in 1911—an attempt that fell flat, for the professors unanimously declared him "talentless." His first experiments with abstract art have not survived, and bore little fruit at this time. As far as can be judged today, even the outbreak of war wrought no change in his stolid, unimaginative style and his habit of painting one bland still life after another (fig. 26).

Hanover and Berlin

In the late nineteenth century, the population of Hanover increased dramatically, prompting the more affluent bourgeoisie to move away from the town center. In 1894, Eduard and Henriette Schwitters and their only child Kurt had settled in a residential area to the south. Four years later, aged only forty-one, Eduard (fig. 6) sold his business, apparently on grounds of ill-health. He invested in property and built a three-story house in Waldhausenstrasse in Döhren, reserving the ground floor for his family and renting out the remainder. After Kurt and Helma Schwitters married in 1915, they moved into the small front apartment on the second floor that was to become their home for over twenty-six years (fig. 68).

7 *Untitled (Portrait of Eleonore Fischer)*, 1927–28 (Schwitters's mother-in-law)

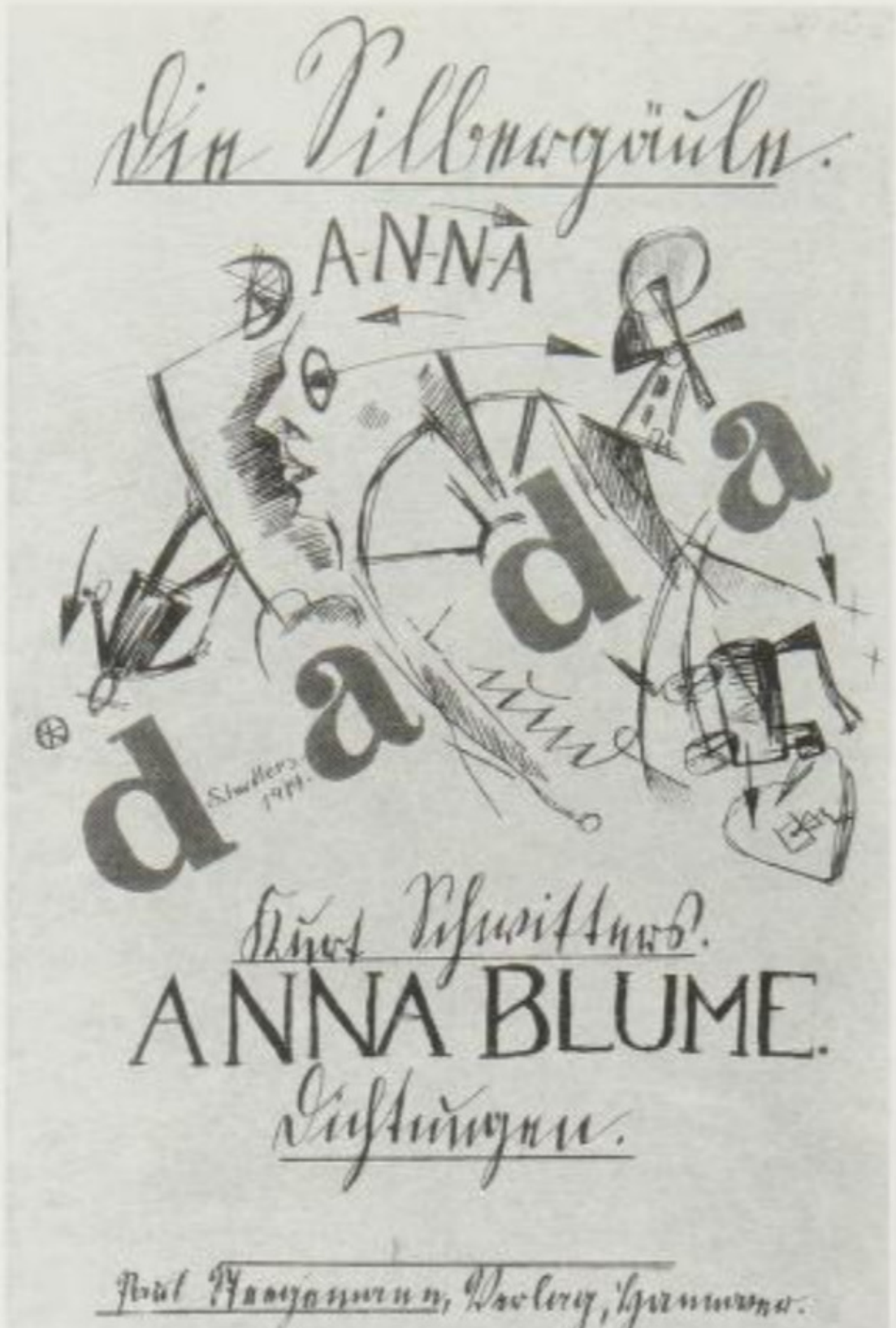
The birth of their first child rapidly turned to tragedy, for the baby, named Gerd, died after a week (fig. 11). In the wake of this traumatic experience, they were ever less inclined to submit to the demands of their authoritarian parents, and from this time onwards Schwitters went out in search of new literary and artistic circles in Hanover. He experimented with Expressionist techniques despised by the Dresden academy, with encouragement from Hanover's newly founded Kestner-Gesellschaft (Kestner Society), a lively private gallery whose exhibitions and lectures highlighted themes of contemporary art, design, and literature. Even so, he remained an active member of the conservative Kunstverein, and when he turned thirty, in 1917, was in effect still a loner, dabbling in second-hand styles and signed up for good measure with two rival art societies.

Despite his attacks of epilepsy, Schwitters was not exempted from war service. In March 1917 he was assigned clerical duties with a local regiment, though, as a lifelong pacifist, he was, at least by his own account, an obstinately uncooperative employee. He was rapidly dismissed as unfit, but in mid-1917 was conscripted anew as a draftsman in a local ironworks. In the following year, at the instigation of his parents, he spent two semesters reading architecture at the Königliche Technische Hochschule, Hanover's technical university. The prospect of a conventional career did not tempt him, however, for Walden had exhibited his new Expressionist paintings at Sturm in June 1918 and plainly felt he showed promise. In November, Helma gave birth to a boy named Ernst. Despite this new responsibility, and in the face of overt family disapproval, he and Helma agreed that he should leave the ironworks and devote himself to art.

By 1919, then, the once melancholy, introverted only child had joined forces with Hanover's modestly bohemian circles and come face-to-face with the brash anarchism of Berlin, where the Berlin Dadaists were bent on scandalizing press and public. More importantly, he had inhaled the heady atmosphere of Herwarth Walden's Galerie Der Sturm and been confronted with the work of Sturm artists such as Lyonel Feininger, Marc Chagall, Alexander Archipenko, Vasily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee. He was thus under considerable pressure to come up with new ideas. The result was Merz.

Schwitters could hardly have foreseen the consequences of showing his first Merz pictures at Sturm in mid-1919. The exhibition propelled him into years of notoriety during which his works, and by extension his own person, were branded as repulsive, schizophrenic, seditious, and an insult to the whole country. A common metaphor for the German state at this time was that of an organism for which "health" was a necessary requirement, and on this basis, some chose to interpret the cultural equivalent of foreign bodies, flaws, and deformities as a threat to society's survival. Avant-garde art thus emerged as a form of disease, and from here

8 Kurt Schwitters's photo album *Fotos nach 1929*, page with photos dating from 1919–25



9 Untitled (Draft of title page for Kurt Schwitters, *Anna Blume. Dichtungen*, *Die Silbergäule*, series 39/49, Paul Steegemann Verlag, Hanover 1920), 1919

it was a short step to blaming the entire avant-garde for the roller-coaster calamities of post-war Germany. From this perspective, the art of the fragment, as manifested in collage and assemblage, was not only indicative of an unstable personality but bore political connotations, and if the fragments happened to be entirely of refuse, the result could only be a product of the dregs of society. In 1920, Sturm cheerily nominated Schwitters as their Artist of the Year—that is, the artist subjected to the most critical scorn.

Schwitters's work was also unsettling to the critics because it evaded any clear-cut category. Early reviews are scarcely recognizable as referring to the same works, for, depending on the writer's inclinations, Merz was classified as Cubist, Expressionist, Futurist, Neoclassical, pioneering, hysterical, subversive, farcical, ornamental, childish, and even female (equated with trivial). Schwitters was puzzled, hurt, and then provoked by the largely hostile reactions to his work. His resilience in the face of a barrage of hateful and often personal invective was remarkable, though yet again Sturm played an instrumental role here. Schooled by Walden's publicity machine, Schwitters honed his own abilities as a critic by producing a stream of witty articles that ridiculed derogatory opinions of his work, including a whole series titled *Tran* (cod liver oil). Though he spent an inordinate amount of time on these (*Tran 30 Auguste Bolte*, his most trenchant satire on art critics, even takes the form of a novella), a quick-witted reply often sufficed. In response to those who found art from refuse disgusting, he rejoined that his scraps of debris were far less odorous and messy than tempera, charcoal, and oils. When reviewers contended that his art was "un-German," he solemnly countered that his material was all pure German, collected from German rubbish heaps. This technique of disarming his critics by taking them at their word was to become one of his most useful weapons. It also earned him the nickname of Till Eulenspiegel, a reference to the legendary prankster, born not far from Hanover, who mocked the proud and pompous by turning their arguments upon themselves.

Schwitters occasionally combed through rubbish heaps and junk shops for Merz material, but generally he found sufficient supplies in his immediate environment, giving rise to the distinctive gesture described by so many of his friends. "He always kept his eyes to the ground," wrote Raoul Hausmann. "He was looking for objects, material for his collages. Anything would do: old and new tram tickets, bits of cardboard, cuttings of material, crumpled boxes."[1] The sculptor Naum Gabo wrote that he was often puzzled when Schwitters retrieved a piece of rubbish: "He would carefully and lovingly clean it up and then triumphantly show it to you. Only then would one realize what an exquisite piece of color was contained in this ragged scrap."[2]

Schwitters and Dada

It was not the much maligned Merz pictures but a Merz poem that brought Schwitters notoriety on a national scale. It was originally written to complement one of his pictures that contained the scrawled words "Anna Blume," and in the poem's opening lines, Anna Blume springs to life as the poet addresses his "beloved" in a burst of ungrammatical rapture. Sense and nonsense merge in the coquettish figure of Anna, the "small green animal" who flaunts her charms in a red dress and whose name trickles like

tallow down the poet's back. The poem first appeared in the *Sturm* journal in mid-1919, but aroused no flicker of indignation until the canny Hanover publisher Paul Steegemann decided to create a sensation by linking Schwitters and his enigmatic Anna Blume with the Dada movement (fig. 9).

Since early 1918, Dadaists had deliberately aimed to cause outrage in the German capital, but until now neither the critics nor Schwitters himself had associated Merz with Dada; the connection had first to be established. When *An Anna Blume* became a best-seller, it was partly because Steegemann promoted its author as "the first Dadaist" and "the Dadaistic genius of Europe." Thanks to Steegemann, Schwitters (who was party to this campaign) was identified by the press as the personification of Dada, and *An Anna Blume* as the embodiment of decadence, the vilest piece of writing of its time.

It was on the flimsiest of grounds that Steegemann marketed Schwitters as a Dadaist, for he never subscribed to a Dada group, though he kept a watchful eye on their activities. In May 1919 he wrote to Tristan Tzara, the spokesman of Zurich Dada, enclosing poems and reproductions of his pictures—the first written reference to Merz. Tzara's response was encouraging, and he included Schwitters's work in the next, and as it turned out, final, Zurich Dada publication. Schwitters's relationship with Berlin Dada is generally defined by an anecdote related by Raoul Hausmann, a founder member. Years later, Hausmann claimed Schwitters approached him in early 1919 in the hope of joining, but Richard Huelsenbeck, the group's self-appointed leader, snubbed his request (fig. 10):

> I asked; "What do you do, then?" "I'm a painter, I nail my pictures together." This was new and appealing . . . At last the man, who had given his name as Schwitters, said, "I'd like to join Club Dada." Of course I couldn't decide that alone; I said I'd let him know. Next day at Huelsenbeck's house . . . it turned out that a few people had heard of this Schwitters, but for some reason Huelsenbeck had an aversion to him, and apart from that he didn't want to admit any old Tom, Dick or Harry; in short, he didn't like him.[3]

10 Richard Huelsenbeck (l.) and Raoul Hausmann (r.), 1920

Even if this dubious tale is true, it is by no means the end of the story. There is well-documented evidence that Schwitters and Huelsenbeck met personally in May 1919 and were on amicable terms for the rest of the year. Huelsenbeck was enthusiastic about Schwitters's work and promised his assistance, while Schwitters reciprocated by finding an outlet for Huelsenbeck's Dada publications. When Huelsenbeck visited him at the end of the year, Schwitters gave him a lithograph (which he kept all his life), and though their friendship was by now strained, Huelsenbeck wrote him a conciliatory note. "You know I am well-disposed towards you. I think too that certain disagreements we have both noticed in our respective opinions should not be an impediment to our attack on the common enemy, the bourgeoisie and philistinism."[4] Whatever Huelsenbeck said in retrospect, he probably broke off their association after the success of *An Anna Blume* as a supposedly Dada work.

As Schwitters's first overtures to Zurich and Berlin Dada made explicit mention of Merz pictures, there are no grounds for the widespread claim that he invented Merz because he was rejected by Dada. It is unlikely that he even considered joining, for Sturm offered far better long-term opportunities than Dada's quarrelsome and erratic venture. If he contacted Dadaists at this time, he was generally searching for opportunities to exhibit or publicize

his work, and when, in April 1920, he visited Max Ernst in Cologne, he was doubtless aware that the infamous Cologne Dada exhibition was making headlines. Ernst returned the visit in the same year.

Rather than Dada rejecting Schwitters, then, it is more appropriate to consider the ways in which Schwitters manipulated Dada. As he was under contract to Sturm, he was obliged to avoid the word in relation to his art, but he blatantly used it to promote his literary works. Dada in Zurich, Cologne, and Berlin had collapsed by 1921, yet in Germany Dada remained a catchword for controversial cultural activities. Once *An Anna Blume* was established as the epitome of Dada depravity, Schwitters handily found himself branded a Dadaist without committing himself in any way, and the label stuck. His friends in any case saw him as Dada by nature. "He would have been Dada even if the Dada call had not been sounded in 1916," declared Tzara.[5] To this day, anything headed Dada will reveal the name Schwitters somewhere in its midst.

On a personal level, his roundabout connections with Dada led to new and enduring friendships. Hannah Höch, the only female member of Berlin Dada, became a family friend, and Schwitters staged performances with Hausmann in Prague and Hanover in the early twenties. He found further allies in former Dadaists such as Hans Richter, Tristan Tzara, and Hans Arp, with whom he shared a special rapport; Arp's work may even have inspired his first collages. The two spent family holidays together, Schwitters published Arp's work, and he was a frequent visitor to the Paris home of Arp and his wife Sophie. Nonetheless, it was his association with Sturm that sustained him through the meager postwar years and the inflation crisis. Walden regularly published his literary work and afforded him opportunities to exhibit, and in his first manifesto of Merz poetry, Schwitters acknowledged his indebtedness to his dealer—an unheard-of admission for most artists. A similar candor prompted him to admit that Merz derived from *Kommerzbank*—a statement designed to mock the myth of the artist as unworldly genius. He was not, however, averse to depicting himself as a genius when it suited him; in 1922, he wrote to the finance office explaining that he was an intellectual in pursuit of the loftiest ideals, and the repudiation of his work meant that he was unable to pay the high taxes demanded of him.[6]

Merz and the Avant Garde

The 1922 Merz exhibition in Hildesheim provides a useful illustration both of Schwitters's idiosyncratic publicity methods and the hostile reception of his work in the early twenties. He had persuaded a skeptical museum director to allow him a one-man show in this picturesque backwater of a town, and from the first he played on his notoriety, with exhibition posters bearing the words "Kurt Schwitters (Anna Blume)" and the provocative phrase "The Well of Lunacy." From the evidence of press reviews and the still extant guest book, opinions in Hildesheim reflected stock reactions to Merz: Schwitters was out to dupe the public, his collages were sordid accumulations of rubbish, and their perpetrator a case for psychiatrists. But Schwitters did not make it easy for his adversaries to pass blanket judgments. He engaged a university professor to lecture on "Futurism, Picasso, Klee, Kandinsky, and finally myself."[7] He also made a point of showing both his conventional paintings and his abstracts to illustrate (as he maintained) his unbroken development from genre painter to Merz artist. This was his preferred practice throughout the twenties, and it invariably met with consternation. For admirers of Merz, it constituted an embarrassing blunder, while traditionalists were perplexed by the juxtaposition of Merz and "proper art." Some visitors to the Hildesheim exhibition grudgingly praised his landscapes, but most chose to ignore them.

Though the remarks in the Hildesheim guest book range from crude to abusive, by now Schwitters had learned to turn public attacks to his own advantage. He earmarked a few pithy insults for use in future Merz texts, and demonstratively provided the porter with replacements when visitors ripped off the blob of cotton wool that gave its name to his *Chicken Picture*. His recital of Merz poems was equally gratifying in terms of audience involvement. The press noted the "fairground" air and quoted snatches of the kind of repartee he relished: "Does that make sense? Is that art?" cried an exasperated listener. "It makes no sense," retorted Schwitters, "but it really is art."[8]

Schwitters's stage career had begun when he joined Sturm and took lessons with one of the most compelling performers of his age, Walden's assistant Rudolf Blümner, whose recitals of steamy

x 9.9.16
† 17.9.16. 4 ~

11 *Untitled (Gerd Schwitters, Study of Head 1)*, 1916, with handwritten note: * 9.9.16 / † 17.9.16. 4 Uhr

Expressionist verse had electrified audiences for a decade. Schwitters proved an apt pupil, for contemporaries describe him as a superb entertainer. "Within minutes," recollected his patron Annie Müller-Widmann, "one found oneself under the influence of this magician, who like a god tore apart the grey, stale clouds of convention, who swept away dusty concepts like shreds of mist."[9] He hosted numerous Merz evenings in his apartment and from 1920 onwards toured northern Germany to give readings of his literary works—no mean undertaking for a sufferer from epilepsy. While the Dadaists generally staged their rowdy performances in cities, Schwitters took on the tougher challenge of stubborn provincial audiences. Their hostility left him undeterred; "I recite with pleasure and great enthusiasm," he wrote in 1927. (Lach 5, p. 255)

In the early twenties, recitals provided a major source of his income, and in 1922 he accepted an invitation from Theo van Doesburg, one of the founders of the De Stijl movement, to take part in a series of Dada performances in The Netherlands. They were joined by Van Doesburg's wife Nelly, a professional pianist, and the Hungarian artist Vilmos Huszar. Their first appearance in The Hague in early 1923 (heralded by notices of the arrival of the famous author of *An Anna Blume*) aroused heated audience reactions, and in Dada terms proved hugely successful. The police were summoned, the word spread, and as the quartet progressed to Haarlem, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and other towns, people came expecting trouble and were easily provoked into participation.

Schwitters later regarded what he called the Holland Dada campaign as one of the highlights of his career. Like the first exhibition of Russian Art in Berlin in 1922, where he encountered works by artists such as Tatlin, Malevich and Rodchenko, it broadened his horizons considerably. Yet instead of moving to the capital, he chose to remain in his parents' house in tediously provincial Hanover, carving out a space for himself with the freedom of those Shakespearean jesters who are allowed to speak their mind simply because they pose as fools. He himself was happy to play out the dual role of bourgeois and *enfant terrible*, but his behavior remained a mystery to most; the man, like his work, looked irritatingly conservative to radicals and distastefully radical to conservatives. Even today, Schwitters fits only awkwardly into definitions of the avant garde, not least because of his lifelong practice of openly painting and selling figurative work. Of his various explanations for this habit, this is as credible as any:

> "Two painters live in me, a painter of nature and a painter of the abstract. Let's say the first is called Kurt and the second Kürtchen. My colleagues tend to treat Kurt and Kürtchen as one . . . Since Kurt and Kürtchen basically don't like each other, each of them tries to appear at his best to spite the other. That means that if one can't manage to unite them, they egg each other on. I live in between."[10]

In Hanover he shared the proverbial fate of prophets in their own country. Hardly anyone acknowledged him as an artist of standing on a national and international scale, and when he sent a note to the local paper that his pictures were on show at a major exhibition in New York, it was promptly returned. Nonetheless, he could rely on a local group of close friends and supporters, among them the artist Kate Steinitz (fig. 14), whose house became a meeting-point for the avant garde, and the advertising agent Christof Spengemann, who publicized Schwitters's activities and also wrote *Die Wahrheit über Anna Blume* (The Truth about Anna Blume), an impassioned defense of the poem and its author. A few Hanover journals published Schwitters's literary work and he found a further forum in the Kestner-Gesellschaft and in the sumptuous, if short-lived, gallery of the collector Herbert Garvens von Garvensburg, whose trail-breaking exhibitions enjoyed international recognition, even if almost completely ignored at home.

After the launch of Merz in 1919, when Schwitters and his work were subjected to hateful tirades from the press, he and Helma had cast themselves as revolutionaries: "Kurt," wrote Helma, "has the profession of a reformer; that means struggle. We will struggle, we will struggle, and the ideology will conquer, even if we are lost."[11] Through his Dada connections and the mass of negative publicity that greeted Merz, Schwitters found himself in a situation that he ultimately deemed undesirable—bound up with stereotypes of conquerors and conquered, right and wrong, "us" and "them." By

1922, his polemical stance had been replaced by the conviction that the way forward was to work with his public, however negatively disposed to him. Merz flew in the face of the avant garde, for it was based on the idea of inclusion rather than exclusion—as Schwitters saw it, a kind of "club for everyone, a club of normal people." (Lach 5, p. 168) His "normal people" were never allowed to relapse into complacency, for by now he had already considered the implications of Merz for sculpture, literature, architecture, theater, performance, and politics. His next step was to broadcast his ideas and those of his colleagues more widely by launching his own journal, entitled *Merz*. As an overarching concept, Merz was no longer conditional on any collage principle, for he not only expanded the term to cover his various publications but also his austere Constructivist abstracts and (from 1924) his commercial design agency. Indeed, he made it the basis of his own life, and from 1922 onwards he began to sign himself Kurt Merz Schwitters, or simply Merz.

The consummate balancing act of Merz enabled Schwitters to remain at the forefront of the avant garde in Germany during the twenties while simultaneously pursuing his own path. This feat may also be attributed to his remarkable talent for friendship and his emphasis on solidarity—in themselves a corollary of Merz. He was prepared to exert himself to the utmost for those who helped him, and anyone who gave him aid or publicity could expect the same in return. He demonstrated his commitment to the avant-garde community by supporting colleagues personally and professionally, furthering their careers, selling their pictures, publishing their work, and finding and creating opportunities for them to exhibit or lecture. He also embarked on numerous joint projects that provided him with an endless fund of new ideas. To search for Schwitters's sources of inspiration is ultimately a fruitless—because inexhaustible—task; he commonly helped himself to any aspects of contemporary discourses that showed potential as Merz matter.

From 1918 onwards, Schwitters had succeeded in forging links with the artist community in Berlin, particularly with the numerous foreign artists who moved there, generally for political reasons, after the war. For all their heterogeneity, most were associated with the International Constructivist movement. Schwitters had always striven to differentiate between the positive aspects of Merz and the negative aspects of Dada—art as opposed to anti-art—and from the first had been attracted to Constructivism's vision of the artist as a key participant in the organization of social life and the built environment. Germany, in the course of a political upheaval, seemed an ideal location for such reforms, and from the mid-twenties it was Constructivism's utopian framework that was to shape Schwitters's diverse activities until the events of 1933 put paid to such hopes.

Despite the appeal of Constructivism, he joined a group of Dadaists in Weimar in September 1922 to disrupt a Constructivist conference, for he distrusted the East European artists' Communist leanings. It is a tribute to his immense personal charm that he persuaded participants from both camps to return to Hanover for a Dada soirée (fig. 12). Artists in Germany were in fact far removed from sites of official decision-making, and the chance of political intervention by émigré artists was even more remote, as their main support came from wealthy benefactors who rarely shared their radical views. For this reason, El Lissitzky, one of the pioneers of International Constructivism, returned to Russia in 1925, though not before he had become a driving force of the movement in his host country. Schwitters had been instrumental in the appointment

12 From left to right: El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Nelly van Doesburg, Helma Schwitters with Ernst, and Kurt Schwitters, in Waldhausenstrasse, Hanover, 1922

of Lissitzky as artist in residence at the Kestner-Gesellschaft, and the two subsequently collaborated on typography projects and also on *Nasci*, one of the outstanding issues of *Merz*. Another artist to become a firm friend was the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy, who steered the Bauhaus towards Constructivism after taking over the foundation course in 1923. Moholy-Nagy had initially been critical of Schwitters, but changed his mind when he shared a studio with him in Berlin in 1922 and discovered the art of collage. Mutual benefits also arose from Schwitters's connections with other Bauhaus teachers. Like Moholy-Nagy, Klee adopted his collage techniques in his lessons, the Bauhaus occasionally published Schwitters's work and invited him to perform, and in turn he arranged for Bauhaus staff to lecture and exhibit in his hometown.

The early nineteen-twenties, with all their fertile impetus, marked the period of Schwitters's greatest literary and artistic output and most prolific experimentation: from sound poems to Merz architecture, from body painting on nude models to designing interiors for friends and patrons. He was constantly on the move, and many contemporaries remembered journeys with him during which he typed or scribbled incessantly or distributed 'Anna Blume' stickers and photos of himself. One journey he never undertook was to the United States—regretfully, it seems, but even when opportunities arose he did not grasp them. He had first exhibited in America in 1920 with the New York Société Anonyme, founded by an American artist and collector named Katherine Dreier together with Marcel Duchamp (fig. 13) and Man Ray. The society aimed to promote the international avant garde and was modeled on the Sturm enterprise in Berlin, which Dreier had visited earlier that year. Once again, Sturm proved an invaluable contact for Schwitters, for Dreier had spotted his abstracts there and exhibited them regularly over the next decade. She also introduced his work to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Part of her Merz collection eventually passed to MoMA, where it was to inspire a new generation of artists in the sixties.

When Dreier first called in at Waldhausenstrasse in 1926, she endeared herself to the whole Schwitters family, not least to the youngest member, for when she learned that children were banned from a Chaplin film in Hanover, she hired the cinema just for herself and seven-year-old Ernst. Dreier was in Europe to find works for her forthcoming *International Exhibition of Modern Art* in New York, and, needing a representative with extensive contacts to the artist community, she appointed Schwitters and his wife as her agents. In 1929 she returned to Hanover with Marcel Duchamp, but unfortunately no record remains of the encounter between these two iconic figures of twentieth-century art. Schwitters last saw Dreier in 1930. With the Great Depression wreaking devastation in Germany, her patronage had become even more of a lifeline, but she had also become a valued friend, "a proper guardian angel," as Helma Schwitters wrote. As far as political events would allow, she kept up a regular correspondence with Schwitters until the end of his life.

13 Marcel Duchamp and Katherine S. Dreier in Seville, 1929

Merz-Kommerz

Schwitters may have extracted the term *Merz* from a commercial context, but this did not ensure its profitability, and after the inflation crisis of 1923 he began to look for more reliable sources of income. In 1924 he set up a publishing house that soon foundered for lack of funds, though not until he had brought out some of his own fairy tales and a book on architecture. In the same year, he launched a more successful enterprise, Merz Werbe, his own one-man graphic design agency. Schwitters rapidly established himself as a leading typographer and in 1927 became both founder and chairman of the ring neue werbegestalter, an international association of graphic designers.

14 Kate Steinitz wearing a blouse on which the programme of the "Cinnabar Festival" has been printed, January 1928

By the end of the decade, Schwitters's contributions to exhibitions were almost all in the field of typography and graphic design. This was not only due to the success of Merz Werbe, but also to the decline of the art market. His first abstracts had found willing takers and been exhibited not only at home but also abroad—in New York and Rome in 1920, for instance, with the Dutch group De Branding from 1922, and in Prague in 1926. Outwardly, his career as an artist reached its apex in 1927, when his one-man show of 150 works toured various towns in Germany. Yet his correspondence of this time tells a different tale, for financial ruin had faced many galleries and art institutions in the wake of the inflation crisis. "We haven't sold a thing at exhibitions and are completely fed up," Helma wrote dejectedly in 1927.[12] A year before, Schwitters had admitted that "I can't live from art any more, and now keep myself busy in all sorts of ways. Naturally I carry on painting and nailing [i.e., making assemblages], but in particular I write for newspapers."[13]

It is difficult to imagine how he found time for his journalistic activities, which consisted mainly of stories, reviews, and reports of his travels, for he had also turned to writing dramas, scripts, and librettos. His play *Schattenspiel* (Shadow Game) premiered in Prague in 1926, and *Der Zusammenstoss* (The Collision), an opera libretto he wrote in collaboration with Kate Steinitz (fig. 14), won an award in Vienna in 1928. Steinitz and Schwitters also co-authored two revues in Hanover: the *Zinnoberfest* (Cinnabar Festival) and the *Fest der Technik* (Festival of Technology), both with music composed by the pianist Walter Gieseking.

With the income from his public projects, Schwitters was able to journey farther afield than in previous years. In 1928 he spent five weeks in Italy, in 1929 he traveled to Scandinavia, and in 1932 embarked on a Mediterranean cruise. He also paid visits to his Swiss patrons: in Basel the collectors Oskar and Annie Müller-Widmann, and in Zurich the eminent art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker and her husband Sigfried, who enlisted Schwitters's aid when organizing an exhibition of abstract and Surrealist art in Zurich in 1929. Both couples arranged soirées at which he recited his literary works. He was better known as a writer than as an artist in the twenties, and in 1930, as a measure of his literary achievements, was admitted to the international PEN Club.

Schwitters's public activities were facilitated by international avant-garde networks that provided mutual support and encouragement, access to joint exhibitions, and opportunities to publish work in their journals. He contributed to a number of these, including *L'Esprit Nouveau* (Paris), *i10* (Amsterdam), the Parisian journal *Transition*, founded by the American Eugene Jolas, and *De Stijl*—the journal of the movement founded by Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg. He was actively involved in upholding and expanding this extensive avant-garde network, both through *Merz* and through his own endeavors to establish new groups. One such association was die abstrakten hannover, whose inaugural meeting took place in 1927 at Schwitters's home. The association hoped to promote abstract art at a time when public interest in art was declining, but their work engendered little of the productive discussion they hoped for. Despite participation in numerous exhibitions they sold little, and in Hanover a critic condemned their work as "a strange degeneration."[14] It was an ominous phrase, for in the eyes of hard-line conservatives, degeneracy was defined as both the cause and the consequence of everything that was wrong with modern Germany.

The Thirties

When Schwitters told Katherine Dreier that the abstrakten hannover had been founded to counteract reactionary trends, he had more than public apathy to the arts in mind. In 1927, a new and well-organized threat to the Republic was established: the fascist Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur (Combat League for German Culture). From the first, the Kampfbund—which drew much of its membership from academic institutions—claimed that theirs was a moral organization, and as the self-appointed champions of public decency, they issued a series of polemical attacks on prominent artists and writers, including Schwitters. If open hostility was not new to him, the nature of such opposition had changed by 1931. With more systematic and official resistance to liberal Weimar culture prevailing, a note of resignation emerged in the 1931 issue of *Merz*, entitled *Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft*, an anthology in which Schwitters's customary black humor asserts itself in two fables that may be interpreted as ironic reflections on the demise of the avant garde. *Merz 21* also introduced the public to two works that in their completed form now count as his greatest masterpieces. First, there was an excerpt from a sound poem entitled the *Ursonate*; second, tucked away at the end of the *Veilchenheft*, was a description of what he called the *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)* or *KdeE* (fig. 15). During the twenties he had proudly displayed this expanding tower of refuse, honeycombed with strange grottos, to friends and acquaintances, and had even allowed some to participate, but had thus far made no mention of his *KdeE* in publications or in letters—a silence uncharacteristic of such an expert self-publicist. Most visitors regarded it as an eccentric pastime, and its location was of course inopportune; it was situated in his studio on the ground floor of Waldhausenstrasse, and one had to walk the length of his parents' apartment to see it (fig. 69). As his father was by all accounts bitterly opposed to Merz, his death in 1931 may have been a factor in the decision to give the studio increased publicity.

A possible indication of Schwitters's thorny relationship with his father may be found in his unfinished play *Irrenhaus von Sondermann*, which furnishes a thinly disguised background to an actual episode. In 1930 Schwitters joined a group of local activists whose members included Carl Credé, a vociferous opponent of the Republic's strict abortion laws. At the end of the year they organized a matinée named *Künstler in Front (KIF)* in aid of artists in need. Despite its harmless program, KIF aroused vehement objections from the right-wing press and ended in a debacle. *Irrenhaus von Sondermann*, subtitled *Politisches Stück* (A Political Piece), was written at the end of 1930 and concerns an event entitled *KIF* that is threatened by reactionary forces. Its tone is, for Schwitters, unprecedentedly gloomy. It opens with a bitter confrontation between the artist-poet Eduard and his ultra-conservative father, and according to the résumé, was to continue with Eduard's attempted suicide and dispatch to an asylum. A week after the disastrous KIF concert, Schwitters concluded *Merz 21* by referring to a review that declared "today Schwitters is simply impossible . . . Times move on."[15] This dismissal of him as an anachronism found an echo in the title of the *Veilchenheft; Veilchen* means not only a violet but also a black eye.

Extremism ran like an ostinato through Weimar society, a ground bass that no amount of Merz harmonies could drown. By 1932, Schwitters had given up all talk of Merz as a remedy for his era, and of art as a means to counter reactionary trends; instead, he joined the Social Democrats in the hope that they would succeed in thwarting the ambitions of the Nazi Party. Nationalistic paroles had always been anathema to him, and he freely broadcast his views in *Der Sturm* and early issues of *Merz*. "Nations result in wars," he stated. "The point of 'national art' is to intensify the solidarity of people who call themselves a nation. National art helps to prepare for war." (Lach 5, p. 199) Further declarations of his pacifist convictions followed, and in an article of 1924, he wrote that the times had become so complex that people needed reminding of their most important duty—tolerance and respect for others. Such sentiments were given short shrift in the flood of literature lauding life in the trenches that appeared after the success of the harrowing war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, published in early 1929. Both the book and the film aroused virulent protests from those with an antidemocratic axe to grind, and the market was soon flooded with tales of heroic soldiers of the front, bonded by comradeship in the service of a beleaguered nation. By implication

these publications disseminated the notion that democrats were by definition flabby and ineffective and that only a strong ruler could restore sense and structure to German society.

As unemployment rose dramatically, so did support for the National Socialists, who promised to do away with useless liberalism and thus solve everyone's problems. Weimar democracy crumbled in 1930, paving the way for Hitler's victory in 1933. Both the Combat League for German Culture and the hysterically antimodernist Deutsche Kunstgesellschaft (German Art Society) pinpointed the avant garde as accountable for the country's woes, and while the Société Anonyme in New York heaped praise on Schwitters as one of Germany's foremost artists, such eulogies could not disguise the fact that his career was in jeopardy. In Europe, Paris at least seemed to offer a market for his work, and he visited the city annually between 1929 and 1932. He exhibited with the Surrealists despite his reservations about the movement (he dubbed it "literature with wrong means") and even attended a Surrealist meeting, but declined an invitation to join; instead, he became a founder member of abstraction-création, an international artist group also based in Paris.

Under the Nazi regime, the classification of 'German' art and artists became an official issue. It was no easy term to define, but art from refuse, even if the work of a tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryan, was clearly not a contender, with its implication that "Nothing is superfluous. Nothing is so inferior that it cannot serve."[16] From February 1933 onwards, Schwitters was defamed in Nazi publications as a subhuman creature bent on engulfing the German spirit in heaps of rubbish named Merz. Merz pictures in museums were impounded and from 1933 onwards his work was exhibited throughout Germany in displays of so-called Degenerate Art that whipped up popular animosity by presenting avant-garde art as a colossal swindle unwittingly financed by the hardworking taxpayer. At one time Schwitters would have fired off scathing retorts to his detractors, but now he remained silent, for he found himself increasingly isolated under a regime that encroached upon all aspects of his existence.

By 1934, his world had fallen apart, along with the avant-garde network that he had done so much to propagate and sustain. All

15 *KdeE (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)*, 1928

commercial and public projects had become impossible for him and his day-to-day income came mainly from landscapes and portraits painted and sold during lengthy sojourns in Norway. In late 1935 he visited a friend who found him uneasy and fatigued, a changed person from the jovial Schwitters she had once known (fig. 17):

> He was in a deep sleep on my sofa, nobody was to disturb him . . . Even in his sleep he looked exhausted, and in the night he unpacked his rubber mattress and laid it on the floor of the room. He didn't want a proper bed any more—the symbol of rest—he refused it. One had to be able to lie down and sleep quickly, all of a sudden, somewhere, somehow . . . always prepared to flee.[17]

Schwitters was certainly on his guard after 1933, for he sent letters containing private information from abroad and published his literary work under a pseudonym. Yet many contemporaries report his apparent fearlessness in criticizing the regime. He posted evidence of public opposition to the National Socialists to friends in Basel and Paris—a treasonable act—and Moholy-Nagy's wife recalled his drunken misconduct towards Nazi functionaries at an exhibition of Futurist art in Berlin in 1934. An American acquaintance remembered an occasion when Schwitters was confronted with portraits of Hitler and Goebbels. "Well, friends, here they are,"

he announced, "shall we hang them or stand them against the wall?"[18] In Hanover it was rumored that he spat at a bust of Hitler twice daily.

With restrictions on almost all his activities in Germany, Schwitters resorted to working on the *KdeE* and other constructions in his studio. These had undergone a drastic change between 1931, when they took the form of large columns, and 1933, when these hitherto discrete objects had been integrated into a sculptural interior. In early 1933 Schwitters gave this work a name—the *Merzbau*—and engaged a professional to photograph it (fig. 70, 1–3), after which he extended it to other rooms of Waldhausenstrasse 5. Nothing quite like it had existed before or has existed since—and all this in unlikely areas of a respectable suburban house redolent with boiled cabbage. The choice of the name *Merzbau* for his new room sculpture is perhaps surprising, as by now Schwitters had almost entirely abandoned the practice of titling his works Merz. Possibly the demise of the Weimar Republic played a part here, for in the twenties he had come to see Merz in terms of an interface where the creative and challenging provided the dynamics of input and output. His methods remained the same, but it seems that after 1931, he felt that only in the form of a *Merzbau* could he hope to perpetuate this once interactive domain.

When Josef Albers, a former Bauhaus teacher who had emigrated to the USA, asked Schwitters for some commercial designs, he received no response for months. Eventually Helma wrote from Norway, declining his request and explaining that she and Kurt were probably under surveillance in Germany. Kurt had considered moving to The Netherlands, she added, but the prospects were so poor that he had abandoned the idea. Anxious to help, Albers offered to procure him a visiting professorship in the US, but in late 1936 Schwitters turned the offer down, for by this time he had set his sights on Norway.

Norway

Schwitters left Hanover for Norway on January 2, 1937, a few days after his son, ostensibly to help him to settle in Oslo. He never returned, and it was left to the unfortunate Helma Schwitters to remain in Hanover, partly to administer the family properties and partly to look after her ailing and mentally unstable parents and her mother-in-law. Kurt and Ernst rented an apartment in Lysaker, west of Oslo, and in time, Helma shipped over furniture, the piano, and crates of Merz pictures that she feared were at risk. Wearied by interminable tensions at home, she nonetheless traveled back and forth between Hanover and Norway until the outbreak of war, sometimes accompanied by Schwitters's mother.

Schwitters's grounds for emigrating remain a mystery to this day, though he had been planning it for months. He explained vaguely in a letter to Katherine Dreier that he had left both for personal reasons and on account of his art, though many artists whose work was classed as degenerate were tolerated—and even employed—by the regime for years to come. In 1939, Schwitters informed Norwegian officials that the Gestapo were searching for him because of his former literary activities, but gave no details. His epilepsy may have played a part, for though it now plagued him less frequently, an attack in public could have had dire consequences under a regime bent on eradicating those designated "unworthy of life". His decision to emigrate may also have been triggered by the arrest in autumn of Resistance leaders in Hanover, some of whom were his close friends. This at least was the explanation that Ernst Schwitters offered to the Norwegian authorities, adding that for this reason the Gestapo had interrogated his mother several

16 Helma Schwitters in front of the hut on Hjertøya, around 1932

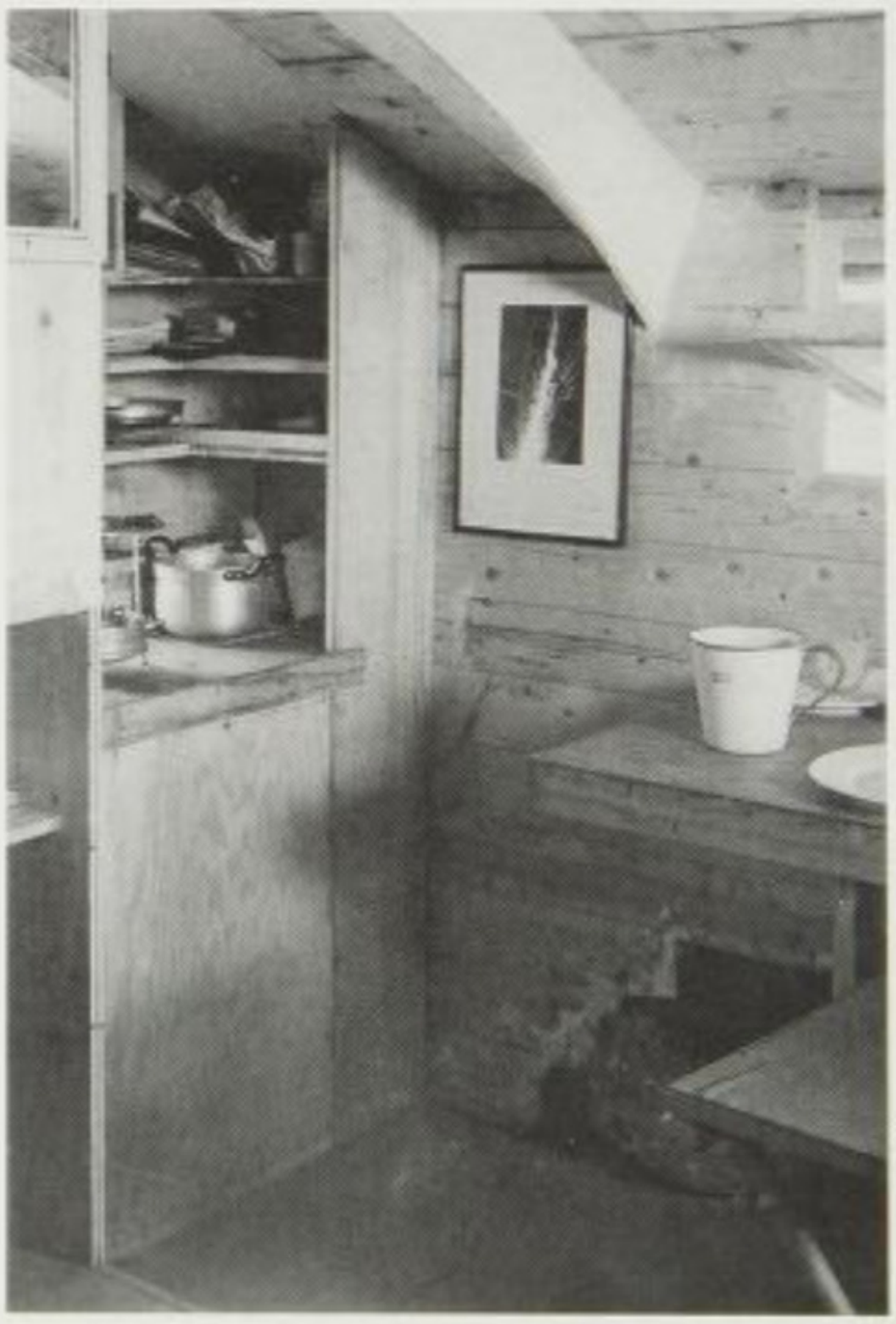
17 *Untitled (Self-Portrait I)*, 1936–39

times.[19] Schwitters's connections with the Resistance are not clear, but possibly constituted the grounds for the Gestapo's issue of a summons to him in February 1937, when he had already fled to Oslo. In addition, his mother-in-law Eleonore Fischer (fig. 7) may have played a role; she was a dedicated Nazi and made no secret of her loathing for Kurt.

In the late nineteen-thirties Schwitters would have been a highly successful artist if he hadn't been living in exile, for in his last fraught year in Hanover, some of his best works were displayed in two MoMA exhibitions, the second of which even included photos of the Merzbau. In 1938 he exhibited twice in London (once at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery) and also in Basel. In Norway, however, he found little understanding for his abstracts, and because of his precarious status as a refugee, had to abandon his plans to travel round Europe and the USA to promote his work.

Schwitters and his wife had first visited Norway in 1929. Both felt a great attraction for the land and its people and in time they came to regard it as a second home. In 1932 Schwitters discovered a drafty, damp, dilapidated hut attached to a potato cellar on the marshy isle of Hjertøya, in Molde Fjord, and between 1934 and 1939 he equipped it with bunks, kitchen equipment, a veranda, and a 'Merzed' interior (figs. 16, 18, 77). Life here was primitive to an extreme: there was no sanitation and everything had to be transported from the mainland by rowing boat, weather permitting. Musing on his future in 1936, Schwitters spun whimsical fantasies of staging a Hjertøya World's Fair with his hut as headquarters, graced with luxuries like a bathroom and a roof that allowed people to stand up straight; as he wryly noted, "I am against all forms of servility." (Lach 3, p. 117)

Schwitters spent the summer months selling his landscapes and portraits to tourists on the west coast of Norway, returning to

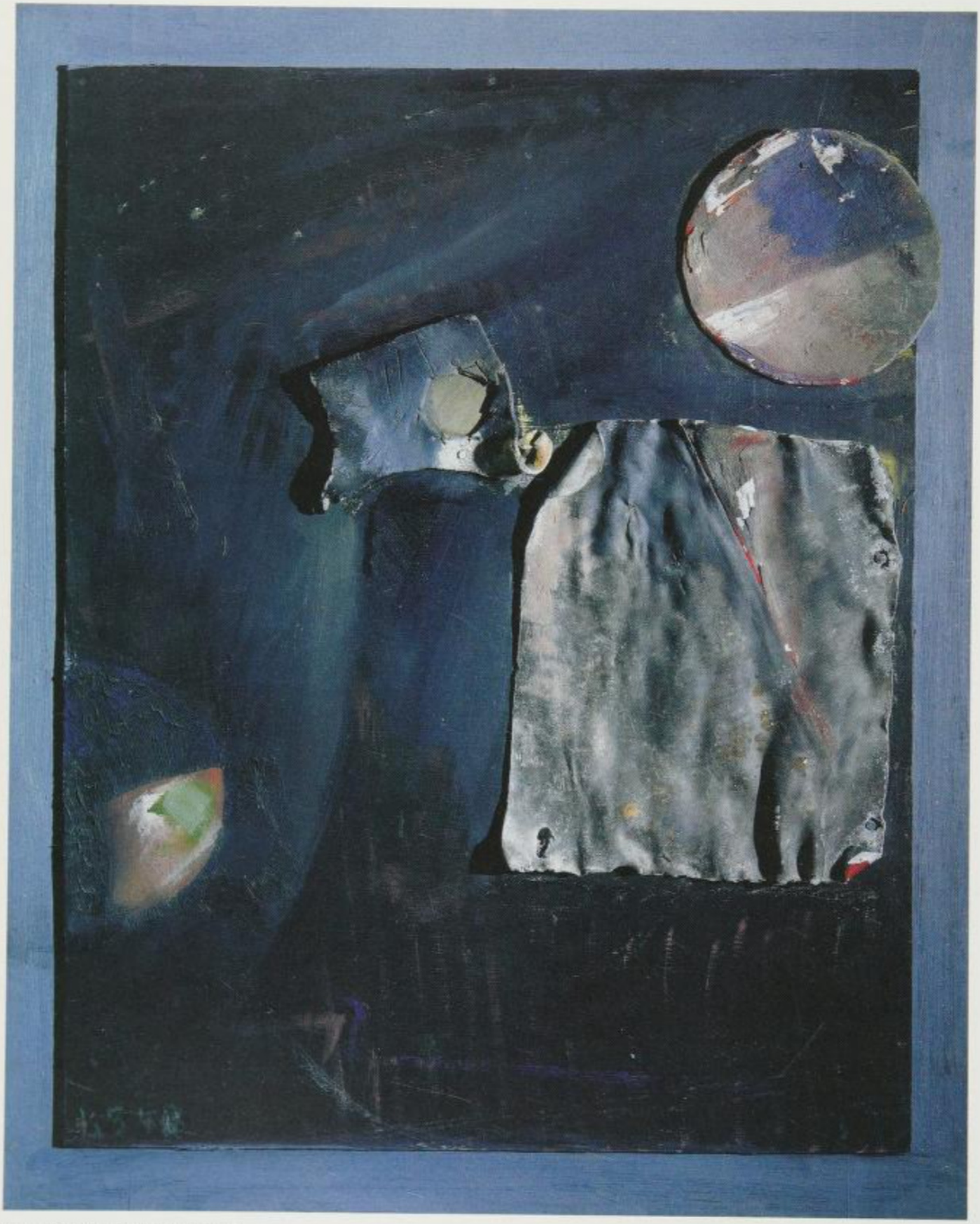


18 The hut on Hjertøya (interior view), around 1937

19 *Untitled (Snow-Covered Boat Landing)*, 1937–39

Oslo each winter (fig. 117). This was the most taxing season, for the cold and dark told on his health and left him dispirited and apathetic. Even his longing for the bygone ferment of the Weimar Republic wilted; debate and discussion seemed pointless. "Nothing comes out of it anyway. Everything is right, and so is the opposite."[20] No museum, art critic, or journal in Norway expressed interest in his work, his application to join the Norwegian PEN club was rejected, and in 1937 his fiftieth birthday came and went with nothing to mark it. Living on the periphery of Europe, forsaken—as he saw it—by friends and colleagues (most of whom were also caught up in a debilitating struggle for survival), banned from seeking employment, and fretting that his residence permit would not be renewed, Schwitters tried to ward off his depression by building a new *Merzbau*.

A few months after he left Germany, his work had been displayed on the Dada wall in the Munich *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition. One of the items was the original picture containing the 'Merz' cutting (fig. 5), seized from Dresden city art gallery. Hitler, who regarded Dada as deeply repugnant, had himself photographed in front of it. It was then destroyed. There was no doubt that the Hanover *Merzbau* would suffer a similar fate if discovered, and in late 1936 Schwitters begged friends in America and Switzerland to find him a location for a second *Merzbau*. No one could help, and in July 1937 he started planning a new studio, the *Haus am Bakken*, in an even more inappropriate location than its Hanover counterpart—the steeply sloping back garden of his rented apartment in Lysaker, with a police station opposite. "I am building a new studio as a visible sign that a new life is beginning for me," he



20 *Untitled (Very Dark Picture)*, 1940

wrote in October. "It has to begin, I'm only fifty years old, one can begin again at that age. In all, life is so cruel that one shouldn't have been born. With this premise one can live extremely well."[21] By 1940 the studio was almost completed, but by now war had broken out, Helma was stranded in Germany, and he had vacillated too long about emigration. He began to receive official demands that he leave the country, though he had nowhere to go. Of the bleak pictures of this time, two possess a particular intensity: a landscape depicting a frozen, forlorn and boatless landing stage (fig. 19), and an assemblage of warped and wounded metals on a grim, inky-black base (fig. 20).

On April 9, 1940, his looming mountain of troubles crumbled in the face of a more menacing prospect. Nazi troops invaded Norway, and in the resulting mayhem, Schwitters, in the company of his newly married son and daughter-in-law, fled a thousand miles north in a dramatic escape that lasted two months. Unable to reach Hjertøya, they crouched in the suffocating hold of a fishing boat for days on end, fired on by invading troops, occasionally detained, and viewed with suspicion from every quarter. On the Lofoten Islands they were interned with a German spy who committed suicide in Schwitters's presence. Finally they reached Tromsø at dead of night, just as the last members of the Norwegian government were embarking for Britain. Another refugee procured them a passage and almost two weeks later, with a host of other wretchedly seasick passengers, they disembarked in Edinburgh.

England

As a so-called Enemy Alien, Schwitters spent the next one and a half years in internment camps. The worst was the squalid Warth Mills in Lancashire; the most bearable was his final station, Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man. Here, confined within double rows of barbed wire, an extraordinary group of Germans, including prominent scientists, writers, artists, and businessmen, greeted Schwitters. Most were opponents of National Socialism, some knew Schwitters personally, and many more knew his name. It was a bizarre excursion into the past with congenial company, and Schwitters was soon contributing to the camp's magazine and exhibitions, lecturing on art at the internees' own "Hutchinson

21 *Untitled (Portrait of an Internee with a Hat)*, 1940

University," and reciting his Merz poems and tales to a rapt audience. His portraits of camp staff and internees (fig. 21)—many of the latter poignant testimonies to life in captivity—provided him with welcome income, or were painted in exchange for camp duties, for his health was by now poor and his chronic high blood pressure made physical activity straining. Few other works survive from this period, as many of his collages were destroyed in a fire on site, while his now legendary porridge sculptures, fashioned from the soggy residue of camp breakfasts, soon gathered mould and decomposed.

Through the Red Cross Schwitters was at last able to communicate with his family in Hanover in strictly censored letters that document both the pleasures of camp company and the miseries of internment. Friends in America tried to arrange for his emigration, but his case was weak, for he had already reached the relative safety of Britain. He finally joined his son and daughter-

22 The ruins of No. 5, Waldhausenstrasse, after 1943

in-law in London in November 1941, and almost immediately made the acquaintance of Edith Thomas, a woman of considerable charm and humor, who soon fell in love with this gentle, kindly German who was over twice her age. After moving away from the heavily bombarded area of Bayswater to the suburb of Barnes, he suffered a stroke, which left him temporarily paralyzed and unable either to paint or write for months. His financial situation worsened considerably and he became increasingly reliant on the aid of Edith Thomas, whom he nicknamed Wantee because of her habit of asking "Want tea?"

Schwitters was unaware of the fate of his wife Helma, who spent her last despairing years fearing for her husband and son, struggling to survive under a regime she abhorred, worn down by the whinings of her malicious mother, wasting away from the cancer that eventually killed her. She never learned of Wantee's existence, though Schwitters made it clear to Wantee that to the end of his days Helma would remain his first love. Yet as just one of thousands of impoverished refugees in wartime London, bombarded daily by his countrymen, with death lurking round every corner, he found it was Wantee who made life worth living. She shared his indestructible sense of humor, instructed him in the English customs that never ceased to astound him, and eased his entry into society. "We live together very nicely," he wrote, "like big children, no problems."[22]

Schwitters's art was seldom appreciated in Britain, as neither the art of collage nor the brushstrokes visible on his portraits and landscapes appealed to native taste. He applied for jobs to no avail, his request for a meeting with Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery, was turned down, and his acquaintance with Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth remained brief. Nonetheless, encouragement came from the immigrant community in London and from leading figures of the art world such as Roland Penrose and Herbert Read. The flamboyant émigré Jack Bilbo exhibited Schwitters's works in his Modern Art Gallery, and Schwitters was overjoyed when he saw Read's introduction to his one-man show in 1944:

> Kurt Schwitters is one of the original masters of the modern movement. . . . the supreme master of the collage. . . . I doubt if Schwitters would like to be called a mystic, but there is nevertheless in his whole attitude to art a deep protest against the chromium-plated conception of modernism. The bourgeois loves slickness and polish; Schwitters hates them. He leaves his edges rough, his surfaces uneven. . . . This artist has been too modest. He has not been boosted by critics and art dealers to the same extent as some of his contemporaries. He is, nevertheless, one of the most genuine artists in the modern movement.[23]

Despite Read's esteem, the exhibition was not a success, and was further overshadowed by a telegram bearing the news of Helma Schwitters's death. Weeks passed before Schwitters learned of the tragic circumstances of her last years, for he had stopped writing to her after discovering that his letters had occasioned the Gestapo to interrogate her more than once. His grief was exacerbated by the news that the Hanover *Merzbau* had been destroyed by a bomb in 1943 (fig. 22). His life's work no longer existed, he wrote sadly to a friend. "For what did I actually live? I don't know."[24]

When his son Ernst returned to Norway in 1945, Schwitters could no longer afford to live in London, and in June he and Wantee moved to Ambleside, in the Lake District. On a visit to the area in 1942 he had been charmed by the landscape, which reminded him of Nor-

23 *Untitled (Portrait of Frank Routledge)*, 1945

way, if less harsh and forbidding. In Ambleside, as in London, rationing was in force and there were shortages of everything, including fuel and food, but he and Wantee soon found friends among local people (fig. 23) and in 1946 he was accepted as a member of the Lake Artists Society. Portrait commissions and the landscapes he sold to tourists provided some income, Katherine Dreier sent him $250 in return for some collages, and friends also supplied financial support, though often there was not enough for a proper meal.

The end of the war enabled Schwitters to restore contact with companions from the twenties, many of whom were now scattered throughout Europe and the USA. Friends in Hanover and Dresden informed him of the wholesale destruction of places he had loved; others reminisced nostalgically about prewar days. The Surrealist E.L.T. Mesens, an old acquaintance from the twenties, invited him to recite his poems in London in March 1947, but the response proved disappointing. Two journalists from the BBC were invited, but left early. "The best time in my life seems to have finished," he wrote afterwards.[25] His mounting burden of setbacks and disappointments found no end, though his spirits were lifted when he received an article by Carola Giedion-Welcker, one of the few art historians to give serious consideration to his literary and visual work in his lifetime. In this essay she set him within a pantheon of artists and writers (including Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Jarry, Lewis Carroll, Apollinaire, James Joyce, and André Breton)

24 Kurt Schwitters on his sixtieth birthday with Edith Thomas/Wantee and Bill Pierce, 1947

25 Merz Barn, 1947. Exterior view, 1953–60.

and extolled his creation of a dynamic, socio-critical realm of art from the building-blocks of human failings and the tatters of a crisis-ridden society. With his customary delight in linguistic jumbles, he responded gratefully that her article was "einfach [simply] marvellous."[26]

In early 1946, news had reached him that some parts of the Hanover *Merzbau* were still visible in the rubble. Encouraged by a letter from MoMA that described it as an important monument of the century, he made a desperate attempt to return to Hanover to salvage its vestiges. MoMA arranged to send him a preliminary grant, but the wheels of officialdom ground slowly and he did not receive the money until mid-1947. On his sixtieth birthday in June 1947, he was photographed with a letter from MoMA in his pocket (fig. 24) that pledged a first installment of $1,000 towards the restoration of either the Hanover *Merzbau* or the *Haus am Bakken* in Lysaker, and in a jubilant letter to a friend, he vowed to give the world a *Merzbau* such as it had never seen before. Excursions abroad were, however, unthinkable, for he had been dogged by infirmities in the last years. He was stricken with attacks of asthma and immobilized for ten weeks after breaking his leg. In July 1947 he suffered such a serious lung hemorrhage that he drew up a will. Against everyone's expectations, he made a remarkable recovery, and began to make plans for a third *Merzbau* in the hamlet of Elterwater, not far from Ambleside (fig. 25). His chosen location was a decrepit stone barn in gardens that belonged to a retired landscape gardener named Harry Pierce, but by now he was so weak that any exertion was impossible, and Pierce, Wantee, and a few others had to act as his assistants. It was a bitter winter and conditions in the barn were atrocious, but he worked in all weathers, insisting that "I have so little time." In mid-December he was admitted to Kendal Hospital, where he died of heart failure on January 8, 1948, aged sixty. Two days later he was buried in the churchyard of St. Mary in Ambleside.

After his release from internment, Schwitters had begun the lengthy procedure of application for British citizenship; when formal approval finally arrived, he was comatose in hospital, and therefore died a German citizen. His wish for the *Meadow Saffron* sculpture (fig. 59) to be set on his grave was not granted, but in 1966 Wantee erected a headstone bearing the inscription "Kurt Schwitters Creator of Merz." Though this still stands, in 1970 Schwitters's remains were exhumed on the orders of his son Ernst and moved to the family grave in Engesohde cemetery in Hanover, not far from Waldhausenstrasse.

"His life after all was mythic: it spanned the formative period of our world and touched the savage heart of twentieth-century history, which is, after all, the only myth everybody knows any more. Also, his life reflected themes of exile and separation . . . with an absurdist humor and optimism. From the start, he was tearing apart newspapers, machines, language itself to make art. When history took up his life and tore it apart, he made art with it. Right up till the end, he was beginning again."[26]

1 Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war Dada*, 3rd ed., eds. Karl Riha and Günter Kämpf (Giessen, 1992), p. 64.
2 Naum Gabo, "Introduction," *Kurt Schwitters in the USA*, exh. cat., Pinacotheca Gallery, (New York, 1948).
3 Hausmann 1992 (see note 1), p. 70–71.
4 Richard Huelsenbeck to Kurt Schwitters, January 12, 1920, in *Bleichsucht und Blutarmut* (notebook), Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation, Hanover (hereafter KESF). For more on the relationship between Huelsenbeck and Schwitters, see Ralf Burmeister, "Related Opposites: Differences in Mentality between Dada and Merz," in *Kurt Schwitters: Merz—a Total Vision of the World*, exh. cat. Museum Tinguely (Basel, 2004), 140–49.
5 Tristan Tzara, "Kurt Schwitters, 1886-1948," *Portfolio* 8, 1964, p. 66.
6 Kurt Schwitters, April 10, [1922], in *Schwarzes Notizbuch*, KESF (see note 4).
7 Schwitters to the Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim, April 24, 1922, Stadtarchiv Hildesheim.
8 Anonymous, unidentified clipping dated April 24, 1922, in *Schwarzes Notizbuch*, KESF (see note 4).
9 Annie Müller-Widmann, quoted in *Kurt Schwitters: Bürger und Idiot*, ed. Gerhard Schaub (Berlin, 1993), p. 136.
10 Schwitters to Ella Bergmann-Michel, October 21, 1934, in Michael Erlhoff, Klaus Stadtmüller, and das Kulturamt der Stadt Hannover, eds., vol. 7, *Kurt Schwitters Almanach* (Hanover, 1988), p. 50.
11 Schwitters to Eleonore Fischer, undated, ca. 1921, in *Schwarzes Notizbuch* (see note 6).
12 Schwitters to Robert Michel and Ella Bergmann-Michel, November 7, 1927, Sprengel Museum Hannover.
13 Schwitters to Galka Scheyer, January 17, 1926, Archives of American Art, Galka Scheyer papers, reel 1905.
14 Wilhelm Frerking, "Die Abstrakten," *Hannoversches Tageblatt*, November 16, 1928, reproduced in *Carl Buchheister: Ausgewählte Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Gerhard Charles Rump (Hildesheim, 1980), p. 284.
15 Henning Rischbieter, ed., *Hannoversches Lesebuch II* (Velbert, 1978), p. 270.
16 Lothar Schreyer, "Der Lumpensammler," in *Erinnerungen an Sturm und Bauhaus* (Munich, 1956), p. 123.
17 Ella Bergmann-Michel, diary entry, April 9, 1940, Sprengel Museum Hannover.
18 Kurt Schwitters, quoted in Ernst Nündel, *Kurt Schwitters in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981), p. 100.
19 Klaus Stadtmüller, ed., *Schwitters in Norwegen* (Hanover, 1997), p. 177.
20 Schwitters to Kate Steinitz, February 26, 1940, in Nündel, p. 159.
21 Schwitters to Katherine Dreier, October 13, 1937, in Nündel 1981 (see note 18), p. 139.
22 Schwitters to Christof Spengemann, April 3, 1946, Sprengel Museum Hannover.
23 Herbert Read, quoted in *Kurt Schwitters Almanach*, vol. 8 (see note 10), p. 32.
24 Schwitters to Kate Steinitz, June 24, 1945, in Siegfried Gohr, ed., *Kurt Schwitters: Ich ist Stijl*, exh. cat. Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 2000), p. 47.
25 Letter to Margaret Miller, March 12, 1947, KESF (see note 4).
26 Carola Giedion-Welcker, "Kurt Schwitters. Konstruktive Metamorphose des Chaos," reproduced in *Carola Giedion-Welcker: Gesammelte Schriften 1926-71* (Cologne, 1973), p. 285–88; also letter of August 19, 1947, ibid., p. 506.
27 Colin Mortin, "Kurt Schwitters at Zero Gravity," *Musicworks* 44 (Toronto, 1989).

The Artist

Artmaking was undoubtedly the paramount activity for Schwitters, who repeatedly emphasized that it was what gave meaning to his existence. Pursued alongside his domestic and professional activities and often indistinguishable from his hobbies, the practice of making pictures and assemblages was integral to his aesthetic and social thinking. The creative urge sharpened his curiosity with regard to contemporary avant-garde movements (especially Cubism, Dadaism, Expressionism, Constructivism, and Abstraction); it was also closely linked to his personal experience. The artist's attention to numbering and dating may be noted as characteristic of a certain understanding of art as an accompaniment to everyday living: for, though never slavishly diaristic, his productions do mark the chronology of a sustained endeavor to generate meaning from materials brought into play by immediate circumstance. Certainly it is true that whereas the artist maintained that his Merz works are in principle autonomous and non-referential, in practice many bear traces of their context of production.

Much of Schwitters's art can be assigned to the general category of Merz, yet his career did encompass a good many variants and sometimes unlikely offshoots. This account of his visual productions seeks to reflect the bold diversity of a lifetime's output and to honor its prolix range, from small and intimate pieces to very large ones, and from traditional formats to provocative, experimental ones. The following commentaries on specific works are designed to demonstrate the difficulties of interpretation, and to address the paradoxes and mysteries inherent in Schwitters's singular idiom.

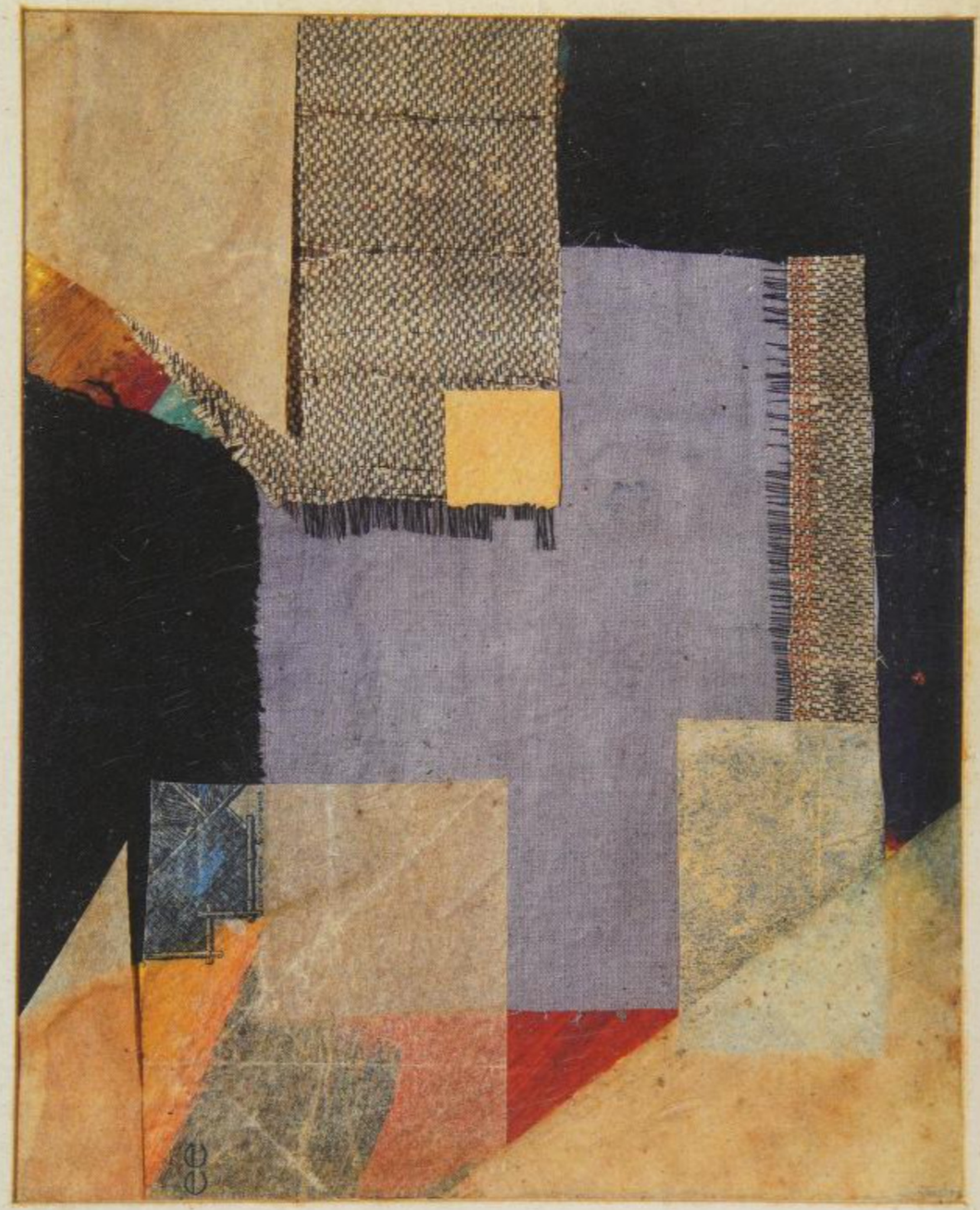
26 *Untitled (Still-life with White Elephant or Still-life with Fruit Bowl, Rose and Elephant Statuette)*, 1912

Early Paintings and Drawings

Schwitters's childhood was marked by health problems associated with his epilepsy. A dreamy lad, he was drawn to music and poetry, and his earliest watercolors are said to have depicted atmospheric landscapes bathed in moonlight. In 1909 he enrolled at the Royal Academy of Arts in Dresden, where he took a course in portraiture and began to develop an interest in Abstraction. Works that survive from these early years include landscapes, still lifes (including a study of a dead magpie), rural genre scenes of somber exactitude, and a good many portraits of his fiancée Helma. By the time the war broke out in 1914, Schwitters was still a conventional painter whose style was marked by elements of Impressionism and hints of the new trend of Expressionism.

During the First World War, Schwitters failed the army's fitness test and, after working as a typist in the military administration in Hanover, found a more congenial position as a technical draftsman in the nearby Wülfel ironworks. This experience undoubtedly sharpened his style and brought about a shift of emphasis: he conceived a passion for machine parts and especially wheels. He was also studying magazines and art books and finding out about artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Robert Delaunay, Vasily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, Paul Klee, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Umberto Boccioni, Gino Severini, Kazimir Malevich, and many others. He was particularly drawn to abstract geometrical forms. By mid-1918 he had fixed his ambitions on Herwarth Walden's avant-garde Galerie Der Sturm in Berlin, and in January 1919 exhibited there alongside Paul Klee.

By early 1919, Schwitters had produced his first Merz collages and assemblage pictures *(Merzbilder)* and was enthusiastically developing a personal creative strategy, having decided that a true artist must shun the emulation of standard models and instead



27 *Drawing A 6, 1918*

28 *Untitled (dol 333)*. ca. 1939

carve out a style of his own. Already he had adopted an aesthetic position based on the refusal of naturalism, and had found an important reference point in the concept of abstraction. Yet Schwitters was now obsessed with his most telling innovation, namely the construction of visual works put together not with brush or pen but with hammer and nails, scissors and glue. He famously once introduced himself to Raoul Hausmann by declaring "I'm a painter, I nail my pictures together."[1] The discarded scraps of urban life, stripped of any nobility, were to be redeemed, thanks to their wilful distribution within a formal framework.

The Collage Principle

Collage (literally 'glueing' or 'pasting') entails the imaginative deployment of a batch of diverse components. Schwitters's collage-inspired works range from paper-based collages, composed of paper fragments pasted onto a flat surface of card or paper, to large and often bulky assemblages fashioned out of such three-dimensional items as scrap metal, offcuts of wood, broken machine parts, torn fabrics, buttons, and coins. The artist explained his art in terms of a necessary salvage operation following upon the chaos of the Great War.

"For the sake of thrift, I took whatever I found, for we were a destitute country. One can also cry out with bits of rubbish, and that is what I did, by dint of glueing and nailing them together. This I called Merz . . . Everything was wrecked anyway, and what counted was to construct something new from the broken pieces." (Lach 5, p. 335) Antecedents of the modern collage can be traced a long way back in history, for an analogous technique of mosaic composition using many small ceramic pieces was known to ancient Persia and Rome. However, twentieth-century modernists identified paper scraps as their preferred material. Schwitters's flagrant assembling of scattered cuttings took its immediate cue from the Cubist *papiers collés* of Picasso and Braque, as well as from the bewildering visual presentations of "words at liberty" of the Futurists Filippo Marinetti and Carlo Carrà. But the technique acquired a particular 'look' and potency at the hands of the maker of Merz.

Photographic reproductions of Schwitters's *Merzbilder* tend to flatten the protrusions, making the works resemble flat collages. The confusion of categories is compounded by Schwitters's eccentric use of the neologisms *Merzzeichnung* (literally 'Merz drawing') and *Merzbild* ('Merz picture'). A rough distinction can be made between works held in place by adhesive paste or flour-and-water, and those held together by industrial glue and metal nails. But since Schwitters did not always maintain his own distinction, one need only recognize that each variant of Merz composition is essentially a matter of drawing disparate fragments into an autonomous whole.

Thus the collage, the assemblage, and the larger installation or environmental work that came to be known as the *Merzbau*—the ultimate embodiment of the Merz ideal—may be seen as mutually overlapping and compatible expressions of Merz artistry. Each takes on meaning as a contribution to the creative impetus that sustains and defines Schwitters's life in art. At the heart of each variant production lies the same fundamental nexus of concerns, fueled not only by mental concepts and imaginings, but also by physical actions. For Schwitters was always a fervent *maker*, preferring work that is *handmade* rather than wiped clear of physicality and signs of process (figs. 27, 28).

Subtending all his creative work is the collage principle, which exploits *bricolage*, in the sense of improvising with materials that happen to lie at hand. In Schwitters's hands, collage-making involves a ritualized sequence of actions: 1) the artist collects a profusion of materials; 2) he chooses certain of these elements; 3) he positions these in accordance with a more or less intuitive concern for compositional effect; 4) he finalizes the arrangement through such interventions as pasting, nailing, overpainting, and framing; and 5) he assigns the individual composition a function within the unfolding Merz narrative by giving it a number and/or a title. Merz production may be envisaged as a serial generation of linked expressions, no single one absolute and each in turn a pertinent contribution to the total scheme. This is to envisage an ever-fertile project, Schwitters's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total artwork corresponding to a lifetime's output in many genres or formats. One might say that Merz production could never be completed except through being definitively interrupted, that is: by the death of the Merz practitioner himself. As the three weighty volumes of the Schwitters *Catalogue Raisonné* attest, the artist's visual *oeuvre* is both

enormous—the inventory runs to no less than 3,664 items—and widely scattered, for the collages in particular are now lodged in museums and galleries throughout the Western world and in private collections on at least three continents. It should also be remembered that many key works—including early collages, most of the sculptures, and all the *Merzbauten*—have been destroyed or lost from sight. Such dispersal and destruction is hardly unique in art history, yet it is worth emphasizing that the full significance of the Merz undertaking remains clouded by the unalterable fact that no one person can hope to see everything: the present writers, like any other commentators, can only draw inferences from the accessible evidence, which can never be exhaustive.

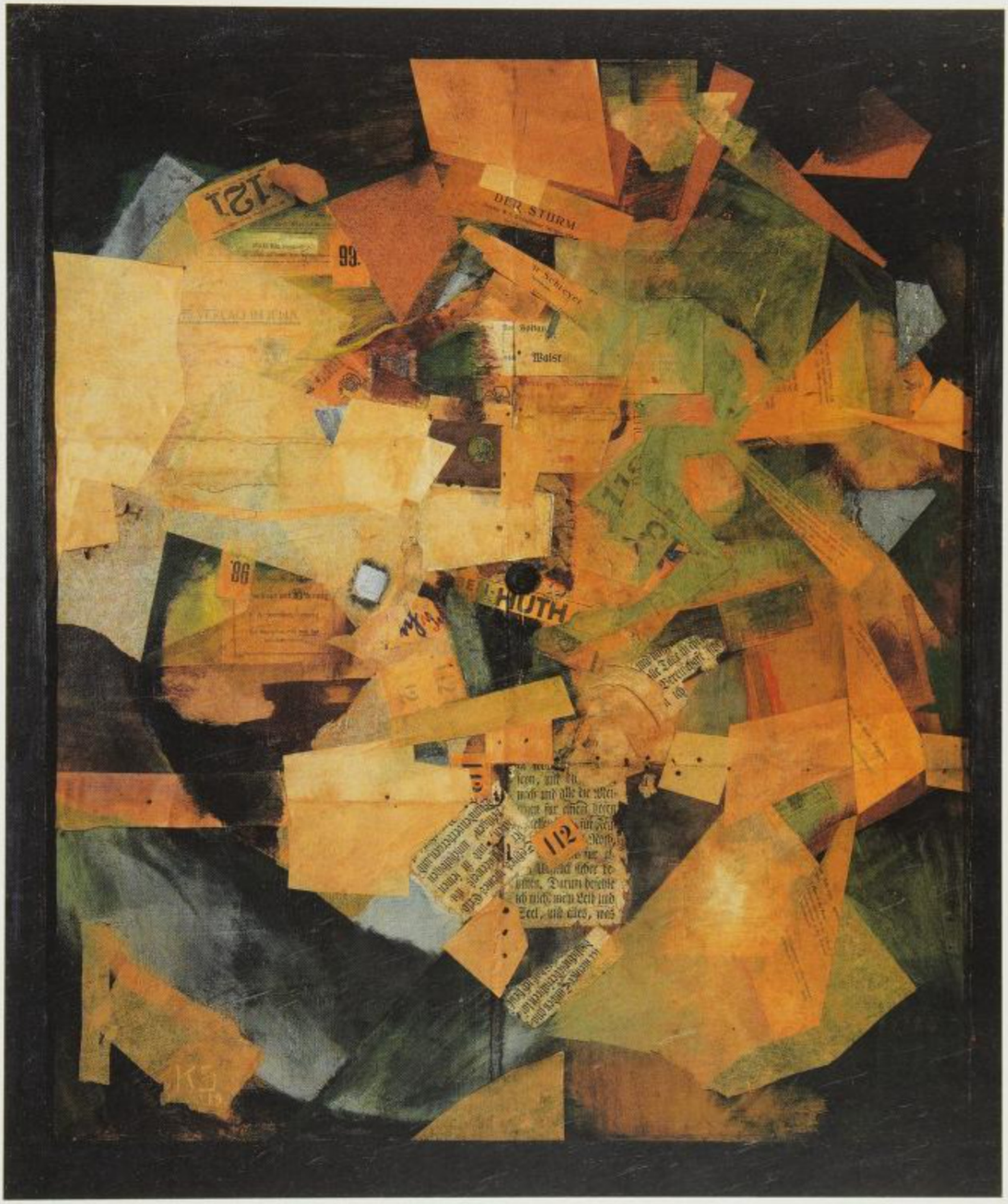
Schwitters himself theorized cogently on the topic of collage in a host of texts, from "Die Merzmalerei" (Merz Painting) of 1919 to "Das Ziel meiner Merzkunst" (The Aim of My Merz Art) of 1938. (Lach 5, pp. 37, 362–65). He speaks of the fundamental act of *Entformeln* or 'de-formulating,' which entails the siphoning-off of the individual scrap's *Eigengift*—its characteristic 'poison' or tang. This, he declares, needs to be removed, so that the scrap can be set free of its origins, and function henceforth as a pure shape or color. There is a parallel here with Marcel Duchamp's concept of the *readymade*, an arbitrary object—typically an anonymous industrial artifact such as a bottle rack—which is promoted by artistic *fiat* to the status of artwork. The readymade need not even be handled by the artist, and once it is nominated, its former function cannot be restored. Similarly, the Merz collage represents a break with the past, for Schwitters's treatment—which, in his case, always involves *handling* the pieces—means that reversing the process of conversion is unthinkable. Indeed, Schwitters usually seems intent upon obliterating all trace of origin; although, as we shall see, he often enjoyed leaving half-clues; and in practice only a small number of his more committed abstract designs rely upon mint paper bearing no hint of prior use.

In general, Schwitters's aesthetic inclination seems to have been to reconcile scrappiness with orderliness, to elicit eloquent form from inarticulate non-form and thus arrive at something belonging undeniably to the realm of art. This positive orientation was Schwitters's independent variant upon the 'anti-art' trend that characterized the beginnings of Dadaism in Zurich (albeit even the iconoclasts of the Cabaret Voltaire were tempted by an aesthetic of orderliness, as witness the clean-cut finish of many of Hans Arp's reliefs).

Looking at a Merz Composition

To examine the early collages and assemblages is to become aware of a compulsive tendency toward proliferation and cramming, as if a surplus of primary material were putting pressure on the artist to pack in a maximum of fragments. This certainly doesn't make for easy reading. The Merz picture or assemblage titled *Merz Picture K6 The Huth Picture* (1919, fig. 29) is one such crowded work, a miscellany of discarded trash glued to a wood base. The items include sections of plain paper, tracing paper, printed paper, and cardboard. Each of these has been torn or snipped with scissors to create irregular shapes. A few added dabs of blue paint seek to unify the ensemble, as if coaxing the errant fragments into a semblance of coherence—although a general air of carelessness and scruffiness still persists. The printed papers include four pieces of torn newsprint on which can be read partial sentences printed in Gothic lettering: "Darum befehle ich mich, mein Leib und Seel, und alles was ..." (Therefore I commend mself, body and soul, and everything that . . .). There are half a dozen printed numerals in the picture, including the repeated number 112. There is also a fragment of letterhead or visiting card for Der Sturm in Berlin, while the attentive eye will catch isolated printed names (Schreyer, Soltau, E. A. Seemann) as well as snatches of handwriting. The composition is framed by black masking tape, one of the simple means whereby Schwitters rounded off a collage, declaring it to be, as it were, both definitive and meaningful: for a frame, however paltry, is like the full stop that terminates a sentence. The scratched cypher "KS 19" (i.e., "Kurt Schwitters, 1919") at the bottom left is the artist's final flourish.

Such a busy ensemble possesses visual coherence insofar as the fragments appear to circulate about an implied locus, a sort of magnetic point around which they swirl in unison, like floating wreckage caught in a whirlpool. A few scattered inkspots added late in the process offer a half-hearted orientation to the mess. The image's pivot is emphasized by a larger black spot, beside which sits the capitalized printed syllable HUTH (in fact BEN-HUTH, but the



29 *Merz Picture K 6 The Huth Picture*, 1919

30 *Merz Picture 12b Plan of Love*, 1919–23

first syllable is camouflaged by a smear of paint). The artist has nominated this syllable as the key to the whole visual statement, characteristically drawing it to our attention by adopting it as his title: *Das Huthbild*. Thus far one may come, but not much further. *Huth* could be an archaic spelling of the German *Hut* (hat), but the association does not seem helpful. It would appear idle to expect deeper meaning to seep out of this clutter of individual printed components, for their role seems to be nothing more than to declare their own arbitrariness: "we are mere sweepings from the office floor" might be their apologetic message. There is a certain futility in the air here: HUTH, we might say, lies at the negative end of MERZ, being nonsense envisaged as nothing *but* nonsense, rather than as a higher sense, a fresh outlook upon meaning. This is why, despite the confident signature and date, we may decide to move on from this work, since it offers no handholds for understanding. (Even if we later learn that the work was named after a Berlin hostelry called the Weinhaus Huth, we are scarcely any the wiser.[7]) But if we are frustrated, it is because Schwitters seems disinclined to provide easy satisfaction. Patience and attentiveness need to be exercised if we are to advance our enquiry into the Merz phenomenon.

Another *Merzbild—Merz Picture 21b Hair-Navel Picture* (1920, fig 31)—contains a similar focal point, this time a button set off-center yet clearly designated as the pivot of the design, insofar as it is literally labeled NABEL (navel). An inscription on the back of this work indicates that its maker gifted it to Hans Arp, himself a specialist of navel motifs in his paintings and reliefs. It may be noted that Schwitters makes a point of adding the remark "Merz ist nicht dada!" (Merz is not Dada!), affirming his intention to steer his personal scheme away from assimilation to the collective Dada enterprise. Such a work may resist further interpretation, but at least we have learnt that the *Merzbild* is not immune to the intrusion of private allusion.

Merz Picture 12b Plan of Love (1919–23, fig. 30) is an example of exaggerated cramming, involving upwards of fifty separate paper pieces, mostly square or rectangular. They are pasted down in regular columns, albeit with many overlaps and crosspieces. About half the squared sections bear printed matter, such as "Aecht Patzenhofer Bier" (Genuine Patzenhofer beer), the isolated name "Paul," inscriptions on bus tickets or medical wrappers, and the title phrase "Plan der Liebe," unusual in its being deliberately manufactured from two separate cuttings. A one-mark banknote and a technical drawing of a machine part occupy the top right of the composition. Again, one would be hard put to elicit coherence from such a crush of separate and incomplete elements.

Another Merz picture may be more persuasive. *Merz Picture 10 A / L Merz Picture L4 (Construction for Noble Ladies)* (1919, fig. 33) documents the artist's fascination with machinery. It embodies various wheels, intact or broken, with spokes and a central hub; these may have come from a broken pram or a child's toy. There are also several metal discs and circular machine parts, as well as scattered tin-plated tacks. (These last appear as black spots in reproduction.) We may recall that Schwitters introduced himself as a painter who nailed his pictures together. None of these objects has the least pretension to functionality, but now that they are

31 *Merz Picture 21b, the Hair-Navel Picture*, 1920

32 *Merz Picture 1 B Picture with Red Cross*, 1919

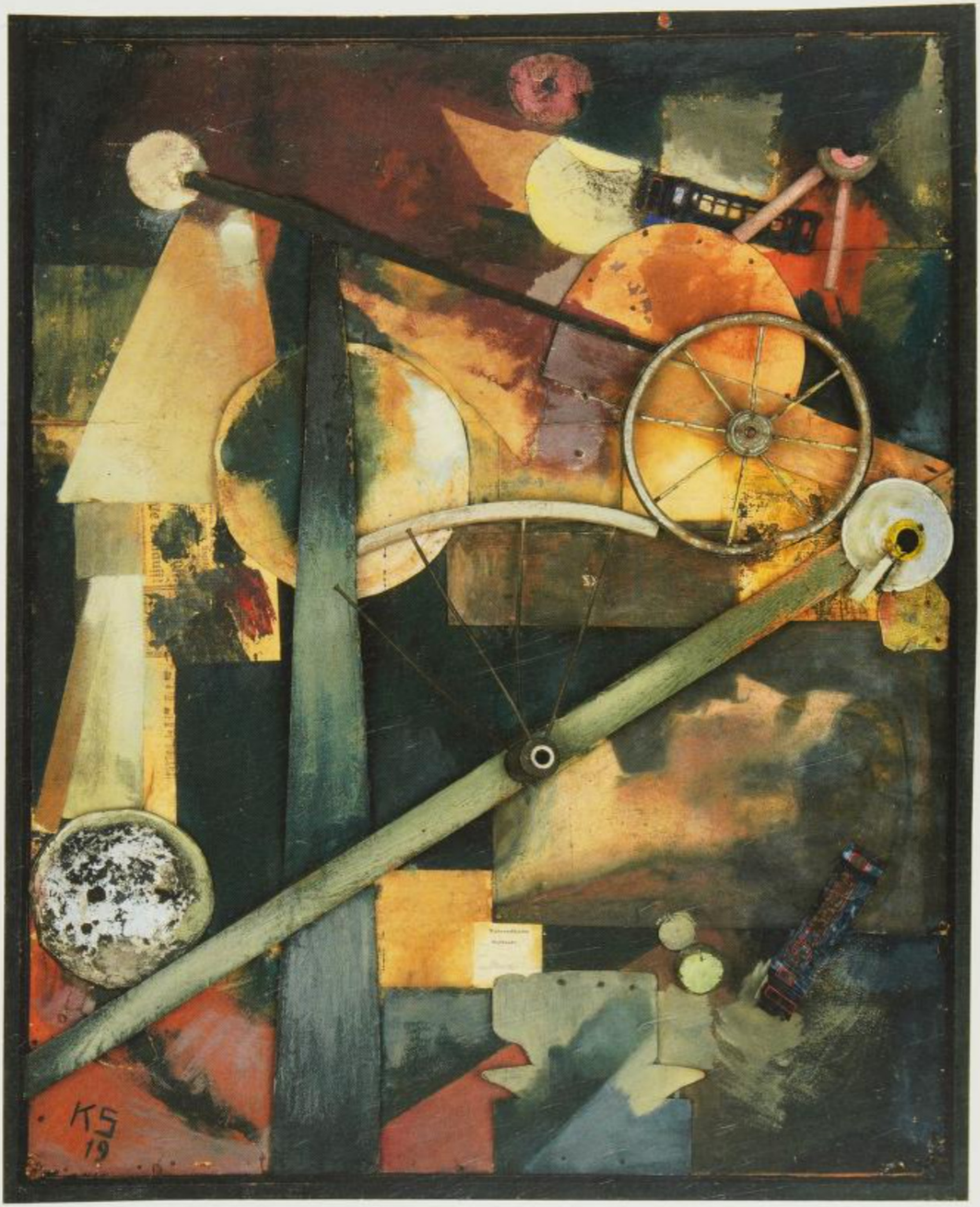
integrated within a *Merzbild*, they articulate an aesthetic proposition with its own original logic. As before, a signature and a frame confirm the status of the construction as an intentional artwork.

Once more we find a recurrent feature of Merz style, namely the casual application of splotches of (usually blueish) paint to the finished surface. These may be said to contribute to the harmonious effect of this "construction," although the abstractive impulse signaled by the shapes of wheels and radiating spokes is offset by the small portrait painting of a young woman inserted among them on the right. She is tipped into a horizontal position that looks to be a deliberate ploy to coax us into attending. We begin to realize that, despite the overall evenness of Schwitters's collage-based work—he normally engineers a general equivalence between the separate elements—there do occur certain eye-catching foci or teasing anomalies. Among the verbal ingredients is a small white card, carefully set the right way up and at the center. It bears the printed inscription "Fahradkarte Riethagen," and seems to be a voucher for a bicycle related to a visit to a village north of Hanover. This little touch might encourage us to read the entire picture as the memento of a cycling trip, were it not that the title of the work insists on the importance of unnamed "noble ladies." A hint of gallantry emerges, but the reference remains enigmatic.

Everything in this assemblage looks to be scuffed, rusted, or broken, so that it constitutes a specific kind of gathering, not simply of negligible junk but of objects that have done service, objects with an exhausting history that are now emblems of wear and tear, bordering on collapse. Such things have, as it were, been rescued from the scrap heap *in extremis* and the dramatic reversal in their fortunes encourages us to see them afresh, restored by the lens of aesthetic vision. The actual paint added to the scheme may also be construed as a knowing pointer to the operation of Merz, one of whose basic aims was to make it seem pointless to paint the appearances of things in the world: why bother with the traditional brush when hammer and nails can extract novelty from futility? We remember the artist's statement about wanting to redeem the fragments of a broken civilization. Perhaps this act of redemption will be appreciated by the noble ladies of the title, who are the implied recipients of the work's message. In his 1919 essay "Merzmalerei" (Merz Painting), Schwitters writes:

> The word Merz essentially means the bringing-together of all imaginable materials for artistic purposes, as well as, technically speaking, the recognition, on principle, that all individual materials have the same value. . . . It is of no importance whether the materials used were previously shaped for some distinct purpose or not. The perambulator wheel, wire netting, twine and cotton-wool are factors just as valid as color. The artist creates by choosing, distributing and re-shaping [*Entformeln*] his materials. (Lach 5, p. 37)

Merz Picture 1 B Picture with Red Cross (1919, fig. 32) is a relatively large work. It consists mainly of paper fragments, but has been classified as a *Merzbild*, insofar as it also contains a few fragments of canvas and pasteboard and traces of oil paint, all firmly applied



33 *Merzbild 10 A / L Merz Picture L4 (Construction for Noble Ladies.)*, 1919

34 *Broad Schmurchel*, 1924

to the cardboard base. Despite its claim to show a red cross, this is a curiously unemphatic piece. Its overall tone could be described as soothing, even neutral, and perhaps its function is to reassure us that not every statement in the Merz manner is designed to startle us. One reason for its tonal consistency is that, following upon the processes of glueing, pressing, and adding paint, the artist seems to have buffed or scraped down the entire pictorial surface with a metal scraper, perhaps a steel rule. The result is that palpable texture is reduced to a minimum. Visually, it offers a suave coolness and calmness, a sort of tranquility belying its maker's usual inclination to cacophony.

A number of *Merzbilder* were designated as *Merzreliefs* (Merz reliefs) and belong to the period 1923–28, when Schwitters felt most drawn to create abstract compositions in the Constructivist idiom. He tends to apply the term *Merzrelief* to pictures entailing a limited range of relatively flat elements, typically slats of wood enhanced by bold coloring and stylistically akin to the geometric abstractions of Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg. Such reliefs tend to exhibit a puritanical cleanliness. Thus *Relief with Yellow Rectangle 2* (1928, fig. 35) manifests a careful regularity in its verticals and horizontals, although compositional unity is very gently disputed by a half-spherical shape and a small yellow-painted oblong set somewhat askew. A vertical strut sprouts out from the picture plane, and there are a few untrimmed edges left by the sawing of the wooden segments that would not satisfy the scrupulous Constructivist. Such a work appears to aspire to an ideal of control and precision, and although it is not exactly aligned to an aesthetic of mechanical perfection (as are the cool constructions of László Moholy-Nagy), it does seem to reach beyond the handmade aesthetic, exhibiting an immaculate impersonality consistent with a Constructivist conception.

At other times, Schwitters produces reliefs that are shameless specimens of casual *bricolage*. *Broad Schmurchel* (1924, fig. 34) is simply a flattish chunk of wood onto which have been nailed a dozen or more irregular lengths of scrapwood. Exceptional in that it has no frame, it has the virtue of rough simplicity. Made on holiday in the company of Hans Arp, it is reminiscent of Arp's own wood reliefs. It possesses a natural unity in that its components are all pieces of driftwood, garnered from the beach during a summer vacation on the Baltic island of Rügen.

35 *Relief with Yellow Rectangle 2*, 1928

36 Mz. 158 The Kots Picture, 1920

37 *Mz. 151 Wenzel Child Madonna with Horse*, 1921

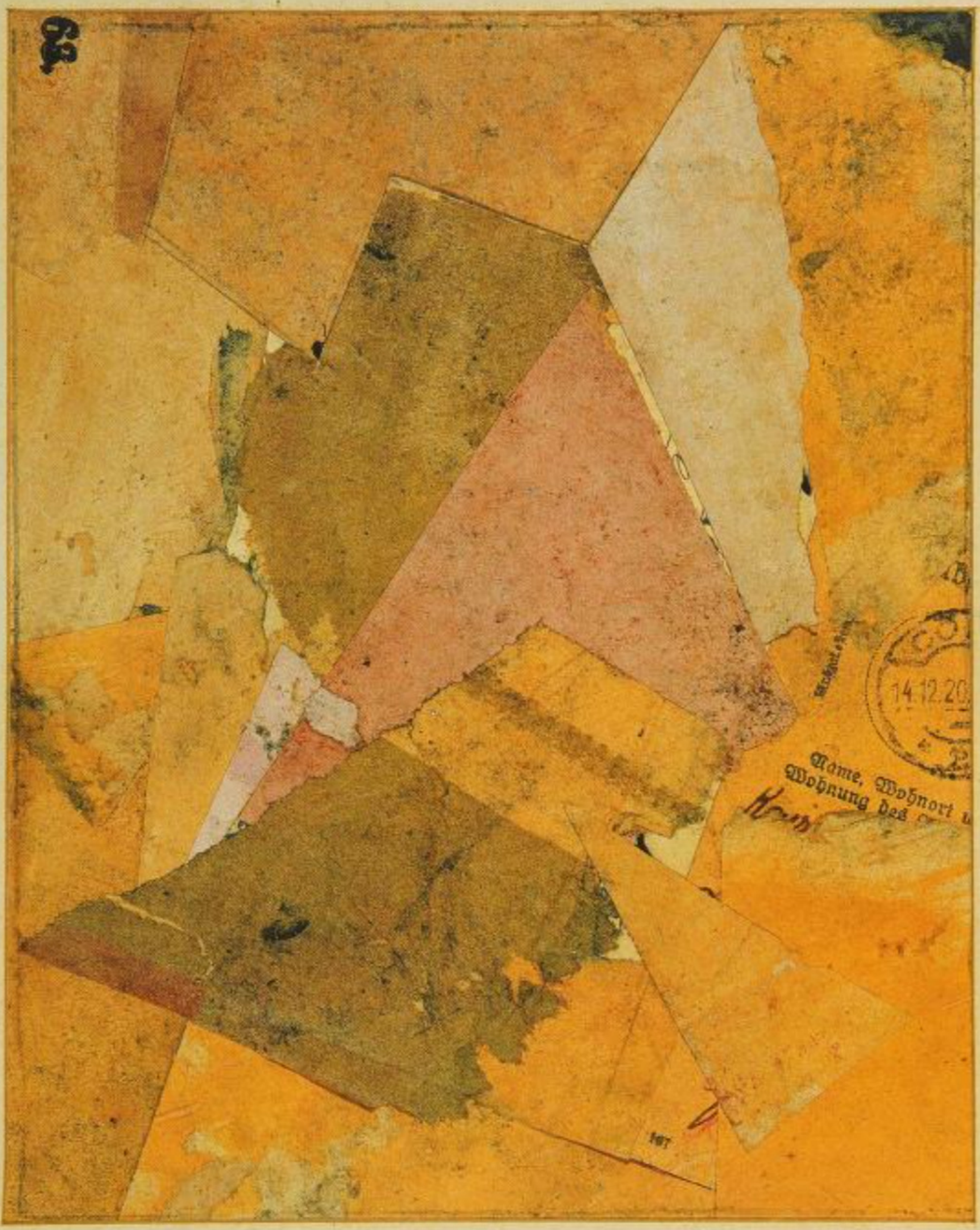
Looking at the Collages

A constant in the paper-based collages is the fact that their components are *layered*, some being fully visible on the surface, others hidden or half-hidden underneath. Moreover, albeit pressed down and pasted to their backing, the scraps can never be completely flat. For one thing, Schwitters never seems to mind if they vary in thickness. Also, his habitual conscientiousness sometimes falters. Strips and folds may escape contact with the paste-brush and hang loose and slightly trembling, as is the case with the vertical strip of *Mz 231 Miss Blanche* (1923, fig. 50). A mosaic built of multiple pieces seems to invite the viewer's touch, for—in imagination at least—one can let one's fingertips slide across the collage to verify its slight snags and lapses. One might imagine that their author sometimes caressed his handiwork, savoring the tiny shifts between the smooth and the rough that disturb the material finish. Handling was, to be sure, one of Schwitters's great joys.

38 *Merzz. 53. red bonbon*, 1920

Mz. 158 The Kots Picture (1920, fig. 36) is an instance of Schwitters in a mood of rollicking fun, as, like a crazy cook, he tosses all sorts of things into his concoction. Here we spot a Polish banknote, over there some fashion advertisements. In the middle we read the truncated syllable KOTS, which German readers might interpret as an allusion to the verb *kotzen* (to vomit). It stands as a challenge to the intimate and self-referential words snipped from a printed page: *An Anna Blume*, Schwitters's best-known poem, addressed to an imagined lover. Here is collage as absurd miscellany, meaningful only insofar as we register a conscious lack of seriousness. Of similar import is the collage *Wenzel Child Madonna and Horse*, 1921, (fig. 37), which comes across as a gentle joke at the expense of orthodox beliefs. The artist has taken a reproduction of a culturally revered painting by Raphael, the *Sistine Madonna*, and pasted the head of a modern "flapper" over the woman's face. A racehorse waits obediently nearby, beside the absurd price tag of three Pfennig.

Merzz. 53. red bonbon (1920, fig. 38) is another expression of the Merz credo, one of whose unspoken tenets might be that "salvaged trash always rewards close scrutiny." This cluster consists of a paper doily, pieces of scisssored card, and some packaging material reinforced with white threads—a mesh originally in a grid pattern but now intriguingly disheveled—along with sections from two beer-bottle stickers bearing the heraldic image of the Emperor Wilhelm II, who had abdicated two years before. A card bearing the bold numeral 22 has been all but obliterated by the semitransparent paper stuck over it. Again Merz appears as an ambivalent practice of combined showing and concealing. Some viewers will be left with an impression of sheer worthlessness, which would suggest that the artist's painstaking effort was rather pointless. On the other hand, the carefully cut cardboard frame does suggest concern, even tender concern. An expectation has been aroused, of some outcome, even some kind of illumination. Even if we advance no further and are simply left in the dark, bemused by a pedantry or a fetishism alien to our instincts, we should neverthless consider that this is but one of around 280 extant works produced by the artist in the single year 1920. Here, at least, is evidence of Schwitters's essential earnestness, of his perseverance, of a compelling urge to sustain an output, not to rest.



Mz 167 — 75. Schwitters. 1920.
Zweifarben weich und hell.
für Clara 17. 5. 1921.

39 *Mz 167 Softening Red and Yellow*, 1920

40 *Untitled (Black Dots and Rectangle)*, 1927

We may judge the collage dubbed *Mz 167 Softening Red and Yellow* (1920, fig. 39) to possess a noticeable pallor. We register a few printed words from a postage stamp, but precious little else—there's no vivid spot of color, no deviation from the dull primary material of card or packaging paper. Hence the impression of forlornness. We may even feel inclined to turn quickly away, as if exposure to our gaze might damage the work. It is so feeble and faded as to appear exhausted, having abandoned any attempt to convey a message. And yet, if we only linger, we will eventually notice the numeral 68 in the top left corner, and the tiny loop on a handwritten address peeping through a narrow slit near the center. Schwitters has allowed these dribbles of narrative to seep into the image: evidently the suggestion is that an individual is trying to communicate something to someone. The opacity of the message doesn't impede our awareness of the theme of communication, a preoccupation of many works of Merz.

If such a work excites our curiosity, then others lure us into a zone of pure contentment, with far less teasing of our intellect. Let us gaze for a while at *Untitled (Black Dots and Rectangle)* (1927, fig. 40). This marvelous piece thrives on its reduction to the plainest visual vocabulary, for it involves little more than a rich orange-red sheet upon which are pasted three black discs of near-equal size, along with a square of paler orange. The components fuse wonderfully to become an immaculate visual whole, thereby offering aesthetic pleasure: that is, the viewer may infer no articulate message, yet find delight in the concordance of shapes and colors. Here is meaning after all, albeit meaning that resists verbal transcription. Such a collage is undeniably a successful work of art, its *raison d'ētre* being the embodiment of such aesthetic values as harmony, structural coherence, and visual unity.

41 *Merzz. 22.*, 1920

42 *Untitled (Duke's Mixture)*, 1921–22

The collage known by Schwitters's non-committal designation *Merzz. 22.* (1920, fig. 41) is made up mainly of faded streetcar tickets, stickers from cigarette packets, and old potato coupons. Its appearance is quite regular and suggests the handiwork of someone operating confidently and at some speed, setting rectangular items in vertical alignment and then placing a few more on top, in diagonal positions that interrupt the regularity of the upright display. But formal properties hardly seem the point of this collage, for its readily legible content immediately refers us to history, even if it is only history of a low-level, mundane kind. Food coupons and the itineraries of Hanover trams begin to take on significance. We may feel that Schwitters's appeal to the nontemporal values of compositional beauty is less convincing than the authentic traces of real existence. We are beginning to speculate on the nature of everyday life in a northern German city in the aftermath of the Great War.

Lettering in the Collages

Textual material in the collages of the twenties ranges from intact commercial labels—such as the unusual oval in *Untitled (Duke's Mixture)* (1921–22, fig. 42), a label from a tobacco factory in North Carolina that turns up in poverty-stricken Hanover, like a stray migrant bird—to segments of print lettering reduced to a nonsense syllable, if not an isolated letter. Almost always, there are at least two sorts of printed material in any given collage, and more often than not, the difference in their source is stressed by a different size of lettering or the use of a different font. Such typographical switches are picked up by the attentive viewer and at the very least disturb any sense of smooth coherence. The Merz collage is always likely to upset our reading habits (fig. 43). Naturally, such disturbances could be the result of arbitrary selection and placement by the collage maker, who may be genuinely content to let his material speak for itself—that is, to repeat a standard message along the lines of "I am rubbish arranged according to the laws of chance." The wily Dadaist Hans Arp, for example, used to make collages according to "the laws of chance." It can be observed, however, that he was never above manipulating these supposed laws to produce a species of 'controlled chance.' With Schwitters, one should be aware that he was perfectly capable of filtering intentional statements into what are ostensibly the most capricious and senseless agglomerations.

43 *Mz. 79. Heart Clover*, 1920

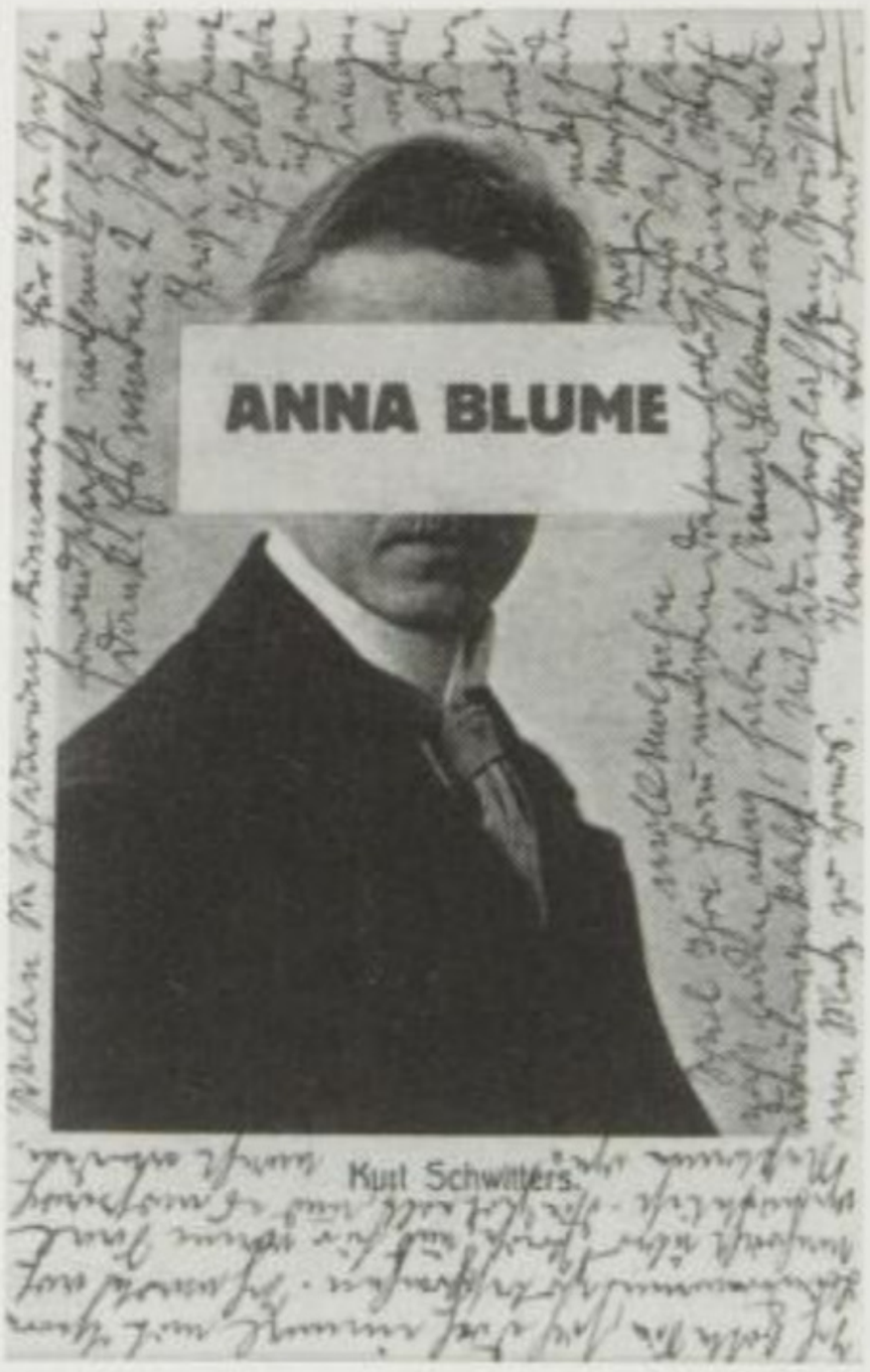
44 *Untitled (Tortrtalt ac hiscann)*, 1929

A salient example of this is a collage consisting exclusively of readymade printed letters of variable size. *Untitled (Tortrtalt ac his cann)* (1929, fig. 44) has all the appearance of a wilful statement, a kind of concrete poem with lines carefully aligned to a left-hand margin. Its syllables appear to transmit a coded message.

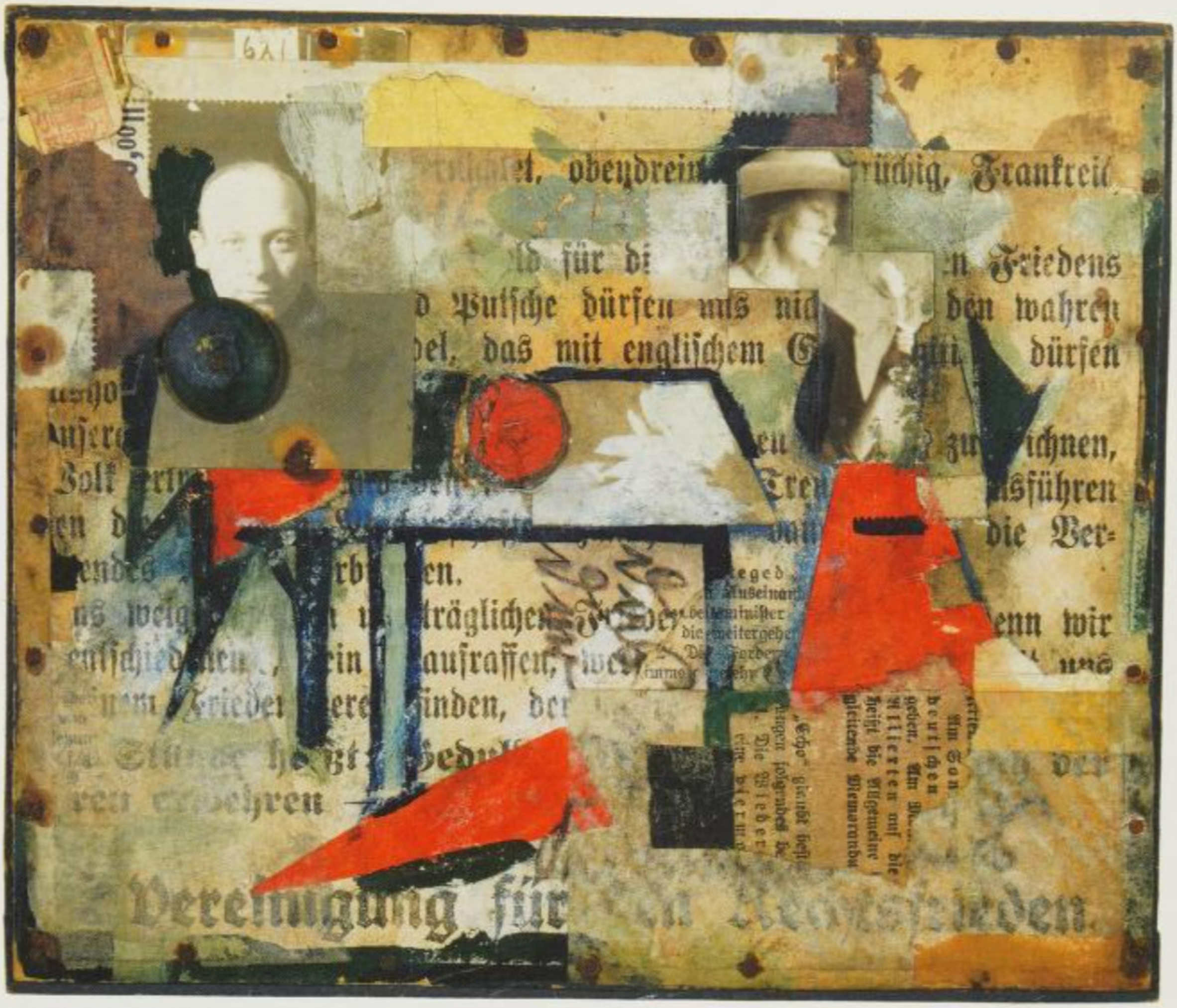
Tortrtalt
ac
hiscann rk
den durm Mun
hesmen der Graf

We may be unable to guess at the strict import of this communication, yet there is no doubting its air of urgency. The lettering thrusts itself into our gaze, demanding to be read, and indeed read in sequence. A certain category of recipient is implied by such emphatic, thick lettering: one thinks of a distraught person being subjected to blackmail. Surely a strong reaction is expected, be it one of surprise, panic, or anger. But can we properly react to these arbitrary dictates? The message remains enigmatic, for only the definite article *den* and the phrase *der Graf* (the Count) correspond to normal German usage. Is *der Graf* to be taken as the signatory of this message? If so, we are at once baffled by his demands and under pressure to follow his instructions *to the letter*.

Of course, the general issue raised by this example has to do with the willingness of the viewer/reader to "play the game." He or she is being directly interpellated by the work and needs to adopt an attitude, a way of responding. One could say that the implied, or ideal, reader of each Merz collage is an alert interlocutor who, peering closely and patiently, learns to accept the possibility of dialogue and to arrive at a receptive, empathetic stance. If we are to take Schwitters's collages at all seriously, we must seek to read between the lines and to construct for ourselves a gradually more stable sense of their maker as an active agent of expression. Taken in their entirety, the Merz collages may not exactly equate to a



45 *Untitled (Collaged Portrait Postcard to Walter Dexel, May 27, 1921)*, 1921



46 *The Bäumer Picture*, 1920

visual diary or autobiography. Indeed, Schwitters sometimes seems to deliberately pounce on mementos of other people's experiences, in the form of tickets to plays he never saw or envelopes from the correspondence of strangers. And yet—especially after his fateful flight to Norway on the second day of 1937—the collages do mediate a progressively more personal atmosphere or tone, becoming more and more like those collaged letters and postcards that Schwitters loved to send to his friends, and in which the communicative intent is unquestionable (fig. 45).

Political and Social Aspects of Merz Imagery

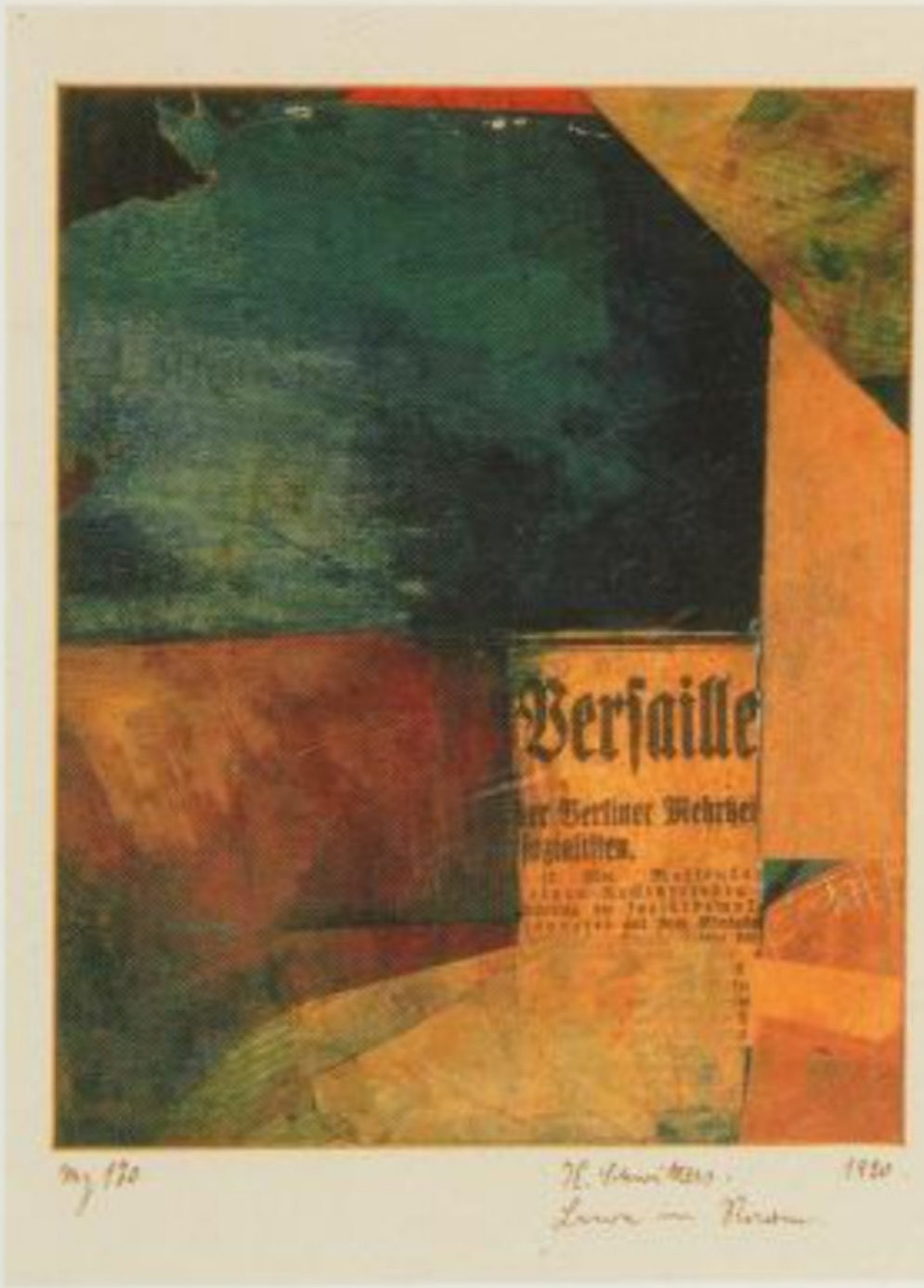
In theory, the Merz procedure implies that each individual component makes a clean break with its past, being 'de-formulated'or dematerialized, and thus assigned a purely aesthetic status and function. However, a good many images exploiting press cuttings, posters, or flyers can be cited as disturbing instances of failed decontextualization, given that the originating context continues to haunt the image, tying it to a specific cultural and even political moment.

Thus the small Merz drawing or collage entitled *The Bäumer Picture* (1920, fig. 46) contains a large section of what appears to be a political pamphlet. This remains quite legible despite the extraneous matter pasted on top of it, including the photo of a man with a stern gaze and a woman holding a flower. Various trivia, such as scraps of orange-colored paper, have been added, as well as some lines in dark paint that indicate a table top. A penciled inscription on the back of the work makes it clear that Schwitters wanted to make a political point, for it informs us that the artist's original intention was to represent the collapse of capitalism, which is said to have fallen "under the title." The title overtly refers to the left-wing writer and activist Ludwig Bäumer, who was a member of the short-lived Socialist Republic of Bremen during the

47 *Untitled (May 191)*, around 1920

first two months of 1919. The tenor of the collage is manifest: this is a memorial to his political efforts. As history filters into the artwork, we no longer focus upon the artist as an expressive individual. He is now operating as an objective reporter of historical facts.[3]

The untidy collage known as *Untitled (Mai 191)* (ca. 1920, fig. 47) consists of ragged strips torn from posters or flyers. On one level this is an exercise in the deft merging of typeface samples, varied in size and affixed at differing angles. On another level, the piece reads as a declaration of sympathy with the ravaged hopes of working-class activists, for what remains legible in the textual remnants immediately strikes a political note. Certainly a contemporary viewer would have had no difficulty in deciphering the larger letters as an allusion to May 1919 and thus to a well-known



48 *Mz 170. Void in Space.*, 1920

49 *Untitled (The Hitler Gang)*, 1944

strike of metalworkers that took place in that month under the Weimar regime. And although such precise historical knowledge may be beyond the reach of today's viewer, it remains the case that he or she will almost certainly recognize that something noisy and violent lies at the heart of this agitated image.[4]

In fact, direct political allusions such as these are none too common in Schwitters's œuvre, but they do strike us forcibly when they occur. Dorothea Dietrich nominates one at least as a stark and unequivocal political statement, namely *Mz 170. Void in Space.* (1920, fig. 48). Among assorted zones of colored paper sits a fragment of Gothic newsprint with a report below the forceful headline "Versaille" (the s of the French name is elided). After long negotiations, the Treaty of Peace had been signed at the Palace of Versailles on June 28, 1919, and came into force in January 1920, sealing the fate of postwar Germany through its stringent reparation demands, its disarmament stipulations, and its territorial revisions. The terms of the treaty prompted mass demonstrations in Germany, whose population felt them to be vengeful and unjust. The news report that Schwitters framed bears the date May 13, 1919. Evidently he held on to this cutting for several months before producing the collage, and the delay might seem to soften its immediacy. Even so, the dramatic foregrounding of the item makes a trenchant display of the collage maker's sense of foreboding. Undoubtedly, the single word *Versaille* is a locus of urgent meaning.

A much later collage, made in London in 1944, makes a striking reference to a named politician, Adolf Hitler. It contains a newspaper advertisement for a newly released American film, a dramatized documentary entitled *Untitled (The Hitler Gang)* (fig. 49). This is one of the few works in which the National Socialist leader is mentioned, and its rarity makes it plain that—despite the obvious fact that political realities had an enormous impact upon the artist's life, and despite the preponderance of political headlines in the wartime newspapers—explicit political references were interpolated into Schwitters's work only very occasionally.

Referential Collages

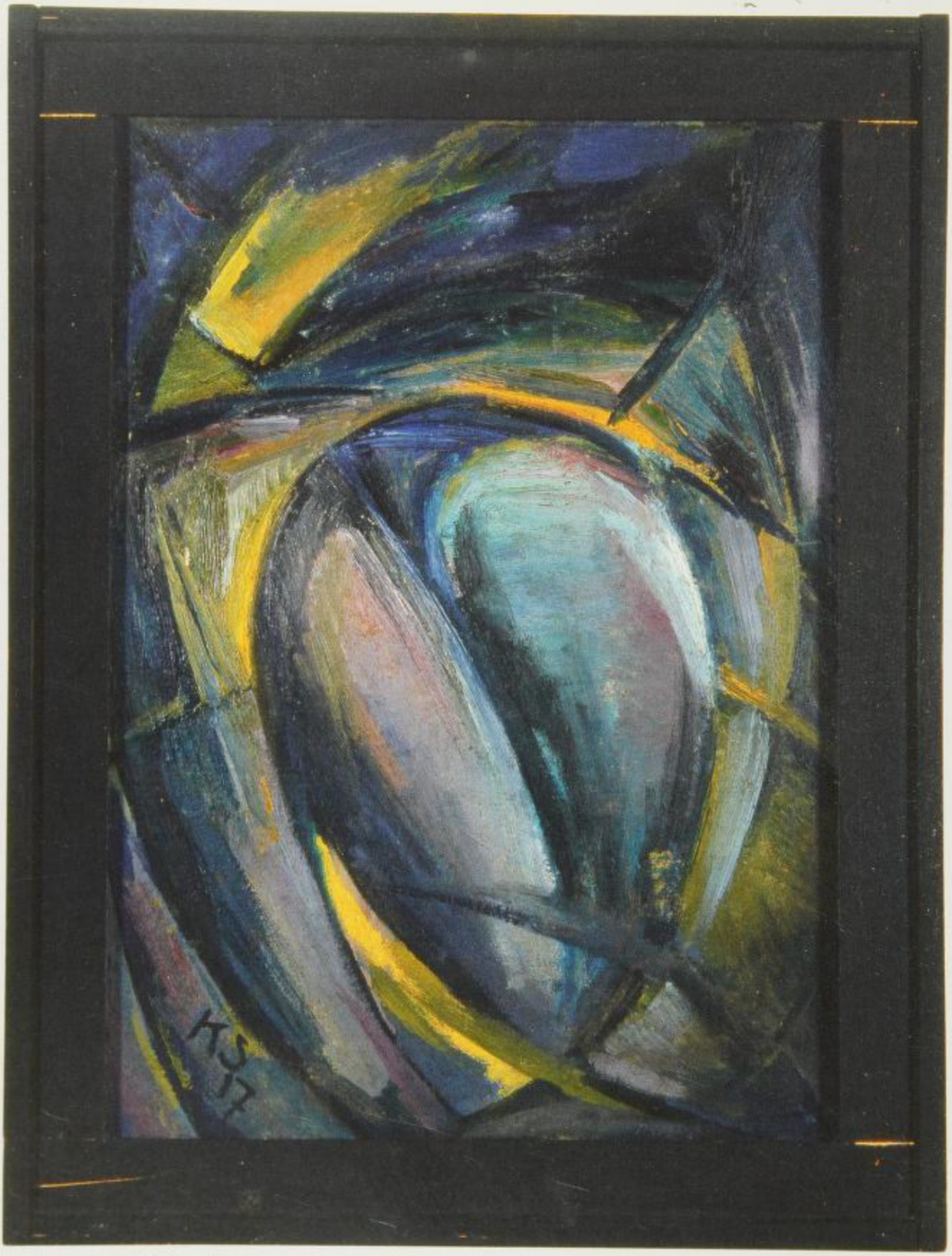
Schwitters's collages from the twenties often resemble bulletin boards or souvenir displays, being built up of paper fragments gathered on journeys to specific foreign destinations. Thus *Mz 231 Miss Blanche.* (fig. 50) celebrates the euphoria of displacement, bringing together a faded streetcar ticket from a trip to The Hague and two labels for Egyptian cigarettes: one of these comes from a box of 'Miss Blanche' cigarettes, while another is part of a packet marketed by Caravellis Frères, carrying a small picture of the Pyramids and the Sphinx. Soberly composed, this looks to be an instance where mementos from a relatively prosaic European trip rub up against daydreams of exotic places.

Mz 601 (1923, fig. 51) marks its year of manufacture with the large numeral 23 and proudly displays an entrance ticket to a show of Manet's painting *Le Bon Bock*, held at a Paris gallery. Other fragments—travel tickets and stubs—boast of a journey through Holland, probably the long Dada Tour of January 1923, when Schwitters joined his friends Theo and Nelly van Doesburg to bring Dada to the Dutch populace. One senses here an adolescent fascination with foreign materials, valued for their thrilling whiff of the unfamiliar, the *risqué*. The collage maker's own name sneaks into the bottom left corner of the design, in the form of a printed fragment which one imagines Schwitters had triumphantly snipped from a press announcement.

As we have noticed by now, the eye's free wanderings within the frame of the image are intermittently challenged by verbal intrusions of this kind. Here lies their enticing, some would say their exasperating, power, inasmuch as they set up a conflict between two modes of construal. In truth, Schwitters was not the first to exploit this disruptive situation, for, as Werner Schmalenbach maintains, he had previously digested the avant-garde antecedents of Italian Futurism, French Cubism, and the Orphism of Robert Delaunay, all of which admit lettering into the pictorial field.[5] What is distinctive about Schwitters's use of words in the collages is its rebarbative cropping of syllables, which deliberately impede our efforts at understanding and demand that guesswork be integral to our viewing practice. This raises the question of whether the Merz collage is a puzzle which needs to be solved if it is to be fully appreciated. A suspicion of deviousness and mystification may raise unexpected doubts in the viewer's mind as he or she settles to the task of seeking out a meaning.

50 *Mz 231 Miss Blanche.*, 1923

51 *Mz 601, 1923*



52 *Abstraction No. II (The Forces)*, 1917

The Temptation of Abstraction

If enigmaticality is one of the key elements in Schwitters's repertoire, he never theorizes about it. On the other hand, he does often discuss a secondary expressive impulse, one which works in a quite different way. For, while flaunting his idiosyncrasy as the maestro of Merz, the artist was also flirting with a very different aesthetic, namely that of abstraction. It is as if he felt the need to protect his eccentric private idiom by simultaneously investing in an alternative style, one which was beginning to achieve wide recognition. As if placing bets on two contrary possibilities, he supplemented his resolute Merz posture by espousing the values of the international abstractionist movement, and in particular those of contemporary Constructivism. The question that arises here is an intriguing one: were these two possibilities absolutely opposed, or were they compatible, even complementary?

Abstraction, whose development through the twentieth century would give rise to a good many variant styles and procedures, had been gathering pace in avant-garde circles across Europe since Vasily Kandinsky's famous breakthrough of 1910, when he produced what is generally acknowledged as the first abstract painting: *First Abstract Watercolor.* In fact, Schwitters was following something of a fashion in allowing himself to be caught up in the great trans-European wave of abstractionist experimentation. As early as 1910, he was jotting down notes so as to clarify the concept for himself: "Abstract art is the transcription of a sublime feeling . . . which everyone is able to read off." (Lach 5, p. 36) Of an exhibition he saw in Dresden that same year, he writes: "The abstract drawings by Katharina Schäffner which I value the most are those in which she has most distanced herself from the copying of nature." (Lach p. 35) By 1918, Schwitters was producing abstract or semi-abstract drawings and oil paintings, some resembling crystals, others cosmic visions (fig. 52). These images embrace curvature and shading and bear comparison with earlier work done by the Italian Futurists Giacomo Balla and Umberto Boccioni, which Schwitters could have found in art magazines (fig. 53). In April 1920, he had a solo show at Der Sturm, which led to his work being shown in America by the Société Anonyme, managed by Marcel Duchamp and Katherine Dreier, a loyal supporter throughout Schwitters's career. Once his horizon had begun to stretch beyond Hanover, he eagerly cultivated other artists, entering into a brief compact with the Berlin Dada group under Richard Huelsenbeck and getting to know Hans Arp, a stalwart of Zurich Dada. He also befriended Theo van Doesburg, the leader of the De Stijl group in Holland; El Lissitzky, the wandering disciple of Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich; and László Moholy-Nagy, a Constructivist who would take up a post at the Bauhaus in 1923.

In 1922, Schwitters attended a congress in Weimar which brought together (while not necessarily reconciling) Dadaists and Constructivists; and in 1923 joined Theo van Doesburg and his wife Nelly on a Dada performance tour through nine Dutch towns. Although Theo van Doesburg was the leader of the De Stijl group and a committed Constructivist, he shared Schwitters's view that there was nothing wrong in riding two horses at once. In the same year, Schwitters participated in a Constructivist show in a Dresden gallery, alongside El Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, and Oskar Schlemmer. By the spring of 1927, he had set up an association in his native town which included three local artists. The group referred to itself, in fashionable lower-case style, as die abstrakten hannover (The Hanover Abstractionists). During the twenties and into the thirties, Schwitters would contribute to the foremost French magazines supporting the abstract movement, namely *L'Esprit nouveau, Cercle et Carré,* and *abstraction-création.*

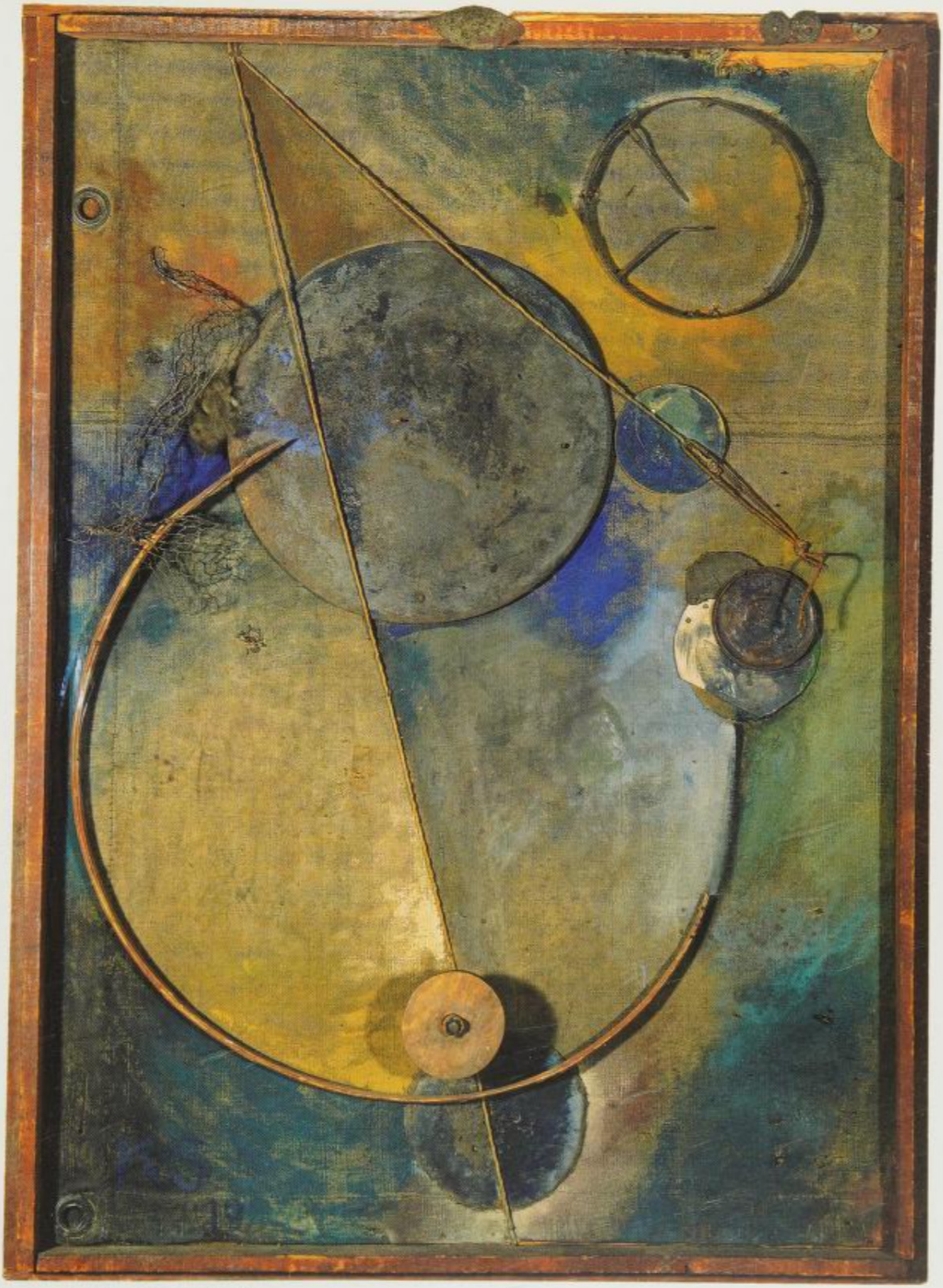
53 *Z 91 Landscape.*, 1918

54 *MERZ 1926,8 Shifted Planes*, 1926

Now, if Merz pictures tend to be identifiable through their irrational juxtapositions and seemingly untended excesses, Schwitters's abstractionist works reflect a contrasting thoughtfulness and control. Schwitters was not interested in the flamboyant accession to pure color that typifies Kandinsky's early abstract period; nor would he have contemplated the abundant spillage of paint typical of such postwar *informel* artists as Jean Fautrier and Jean-Paul Riopelle. Instead, his main inclination in the interwar years was to an austere geometricism, suggestive of an affinity with Mondrian and Van Doesburg. Implementing an orthogonal compositional grid, he drew on a limited range of hues whose subtle interaction emphasizes the qualities of harmony and symmetry. What is notable in interwar European Constructivism is its frequent tendency to make advances into the third dimension. In common with practitioners like El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, Schwitters was always tempted by the expressive possibilities of relief, whereby straight-edged sections of wood jut out toward the viewer and disrupt the sense of flatness. This spatial and geometrical trend would lead him to a concern with sculpture, and climaxes in the Hanover *Merzbau*, whose Constructivist highpoint was reached in around 1932–33.

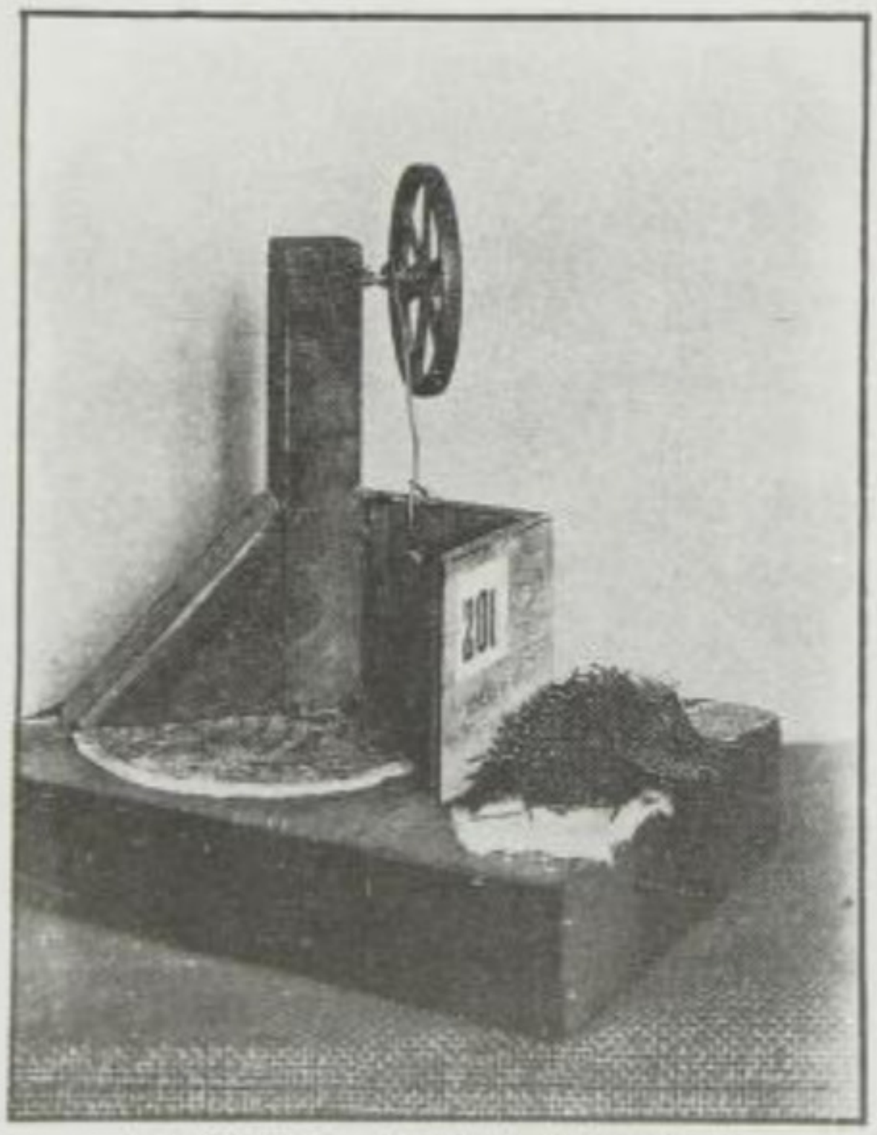
In truth, Schwitters's abstract works were never subordinated to a single fixed model, for his work in different formats reflects a variety of approaches. Thus the early *Merzbilder* of around 1919 adhere to a simple geometric vocabulary of circles, straight lines and triangles, as in *Revolving* (formerly *Global Circles*) 1919, fig. 56), where our attention is drawn to the relationships between round tin lids and coins of different sizes by a stretch of string, sharply angled and drawn taut. (The layout here may suggest a diagram of planetary movements, and some critics have posited an interest in fashionable ideas about the galaxy and its mystic relation to the human sensibility.)

55 *Mz 252. Colored Squares.*, 1921



56 *Revolving (formerly Global Circles)*, 1919

Other works dating from as early as 1921 reveal a preoccupation with colorful mosaic patterns in the manner of Piet Mondrian. One at least reads as a clever pastiche of the master abstractionist's style: it is *MERZ 1926, 8 Shifted Planes* (1926, fig. 54), a meticulously executed oil painting in which upwards of thirty neatly delineated squares and rectangles of diverse bright and dark hues adhere to a strict orthogonal grid. Another abstraction based on squares is the collage *Mz 252. Colored Squares.* (1921, fig. 55), though here Schwitters complicates matters by producing a set of carefully aligned paper squares and then installing them on a diagonal. Furthermore, he inserts at least two scraps which are even more noticeably askew, as well as tolerating the torn edge on one piece of paper. The colors amassed here are nowhere near as eye-catching as the painted hues of Mondrian, so that one may consider this an instance of abstractionist orthodoxy qualified by a modest reminder of the dissident element in Merz composition.



57 *The Pleasure Gallows*, around 1919

58 *The Holy Affliction*, around 1920

The Sculptural Works

Schwitters's first three-dimensional Merz objects date from 1919. He adopted different approaches to sculpture in the early twenties, but always in ways that drew attention to materials as much as to form. There were objects of stark simplicity, such as *Untitled (Small Black Column)* (fig. 63), whose smooth black geometrical forms are offset by a coarse white rod, an irritating feature in an otherwise elegant ensemble. The rod acts as a support but is set at an awkward, almost defiant angle, a paradigmatic example of Schwitters's insistence on revealing—here even flaunting—his methods and materials. Then there were works that were not sculptures in the accepted sense but rather sculptural assemblages made of refuse (fig. 57). From their size, the first of these seem timid excursions into the three-dimensional, but in 1920 Schwitters had himself photographed with a larger object, the *The Holy Affliction* (fig. 58), that impacted far more brazenly on its surroundings.

When a photo of this work was published in one of Germany's leading financial newspapers, the irony cannot have been lost on Schwitters. Here we see a triptych of producer, product, and resources: the artist himself, a tailor's dummy of his mother's hung about with urban refuse as an acerbic commentary on the turbulent Germany of 1920, and in the center, a cluttered shelf of Merz paraphernalia. The figure not only presents a challenge to its environment—it *is* its environment. This was not an exhibition piece, but art informed by its prosaic surroundings and sited where it was least welcome—the leafy suburbs of Hanover, at a safe remove from postwar turmoil. The word *Wahnsinn* (madness) on a scrap of paper attached to the figure can be read as the artist's comment on

current events or backfire as a comment on the figure itself, and in this milieu it was surely the latter interpretation that prevailed. Ambivalence is intrinsic to Schwitters's work, if only by dint of his materials; to offer a clear-cut interpretation is to miss the point.

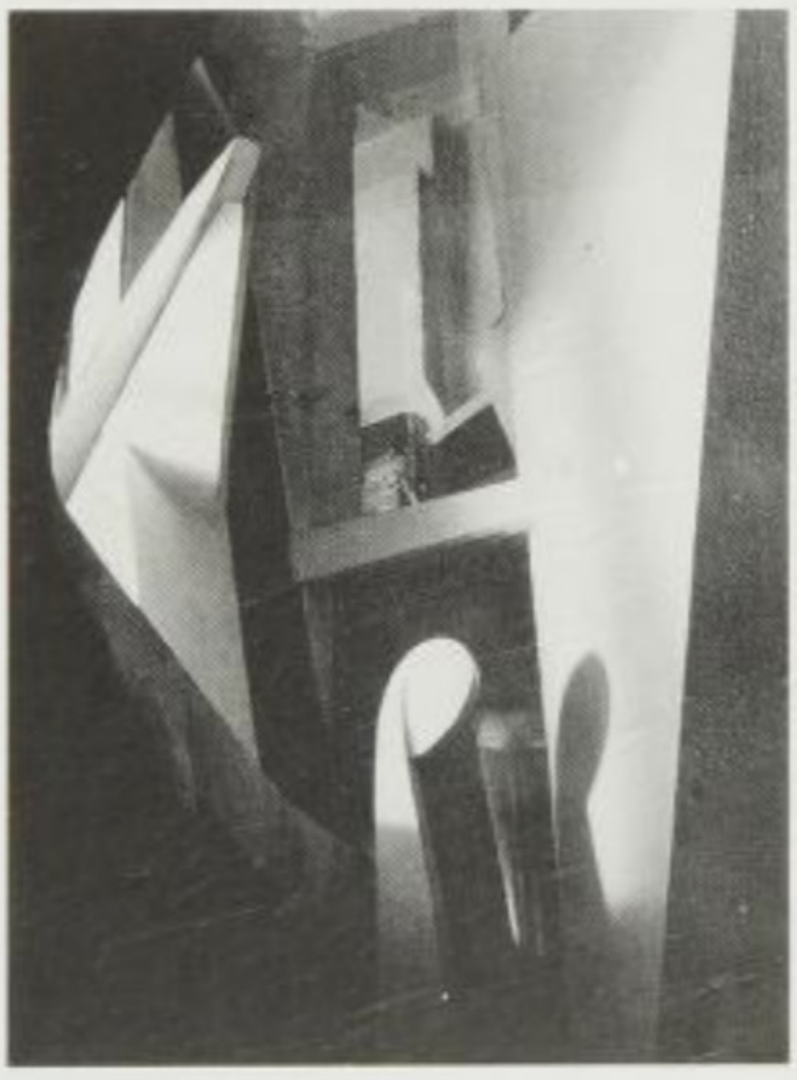
Few of Schwitters's early sculptures have survived, for like *The Holy Affliction*, most were incorporated into the Hanover *Merzbau* and thus shared its fate. *Meadow Saffron* (fig. 59), reconstructed on the basis of photos, is probably exemplary of the abstract sculptures he produced up to the time of his exile—white, with clean lines and a slightly curving upward thrust, which in the expressive *Meadow Saffron* gains further spiraling impetus by the displacement of the stepped base. This work apparently held a special significance for him, and a marble replica now adorns his grave in Hanover. Its form was abstracted from a plant whose offbeat nature he doubtless found appealing—a potentially lethal herbal remedy that flowers in autumn.

Many of Schwitters's abstract sculptures of the thirties were created in France, Switzerland and Norway, far from National Social-

59 *Meadow Saffron*, 1926–29

ist scrutiny. They are less solid and more unstable structures, as if reflecting his mounting restiveness and unease (fig. 60). Some display the white plaster casing that was to become a dominant feature of the *Merzbau* after 1933, while others consist of evocative fragments of driftwood from the shores of Hjertøya, the Norwegian isle on which he lived intermittently from 1932 to 1940 (fig. 65). In the sculptures of these years it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between abstract forms and *objets trouvés*. Another of

60 *Slender Sculpture*, 1935



61 *Madonna I* in the Hanover *Merzbau*, around 1936

62 *Untitled (Large Merz Column)*, Hjertøya, around 1936

63 *Untitled (Small Black Column)*, 1922–24

Schwitters's favorite works, *Madonna* (fig. 61), which existed in several versions, consisted of a painted upturned wooden chair arm, while the monumental three-meter-high column (fig. 62) he erected on Hjertøya was made of a wrecked rowing boat. Frowned upon by the local authorities, it was generally kept in a shed and now only exists as a replica, for the original disintegrated after Schwitters left Norway.

Schwitters's years of exile were dogged by a series of life-threatening situations, from his dramatic flight from Nazi troops in 1940 to a succession of severe illnesses in England. Pondering on his legacy to future generations, he decided that his collages and assemblages, so often scorned, ridiculed, and even destroyed by his contemporaries, were in any case not representative of his best work. He began to devote himself more intensively to sculpture, most particularly in the form of small objects made of refuse or of natural material, which could fit into a suitcase or even a pocket. Most lack a base, are brightly colored, and can be positioned at any angle. The sculptures he produced in England after his release from internment in 1941 tend in contrast to be larger structures with a clear orientation and a solid base. They are reminiscent of those of the early thirties, though more complex and often more colorful (fig. 64).

Despite the hardships that Schwitters endured as a refugee, many sculptures he made in exile in England are remarkable in displaying the kind of quirky humor and capacity for self-mockery that characterized his first Merz sculptural assemblages (fig. 66). *Untitled (All-Embracing Sculpture)* (fig. 67) seems to consist of driftwood or bone, embellished with plaster and an (incomplete) covering of paint. What on earth might this modest but determined little figure hope to embrace? Schwitters always enjoys playing

64 *Untitled (Painted Plaster and Wood Form)*, 1945–47

65 *Untitled (Recollection of Hjertøya)*, 1936–39

66 *Dancer*, 1943

with dimensions, belittling the great until it becomes ludicrous, and accentuating the insignificant until it forces itself on our vision. If we have an all-embracing sort of mind, we might here see a performer whose gesture describes a graceful arc, swinging a cape, acknowledging us as its audience—a whimsical self-portrait perhaps? Whether the sculpture is introducing itself politely or bowing out, it resolutely draws attention to itself in the hope we will not overlook it. As an ironic gloss on the war's accelerated processes of destruction, Schwitters also hastened the creation of the found object. On Hjertøya, he noted, the beaches had yielded organic matter of decaying charm that told of long struggles with the surf, and he had collected these objects to make what he called "amusing compositions" on the walls of his hut. In war-weary England, instead of waiting for the ravages of time to run their course, he bought bones, gave them to a dog, and plastered over the gnawed remains to make sculptures.

Schwitters's hopes that the sculptures of his exile years would gain international recognition as his best work were never realized, and for many decades after his death his sculptural oeuvre was almost forgotten. Much of it was in any case housed in the *Merzbauten* and has been lost for ever, for very little has survived of the legendary interiors that were arguably Schwitters's greatest contribution to twentieth-century sculpture.

67 Untitled (The All-Embracing Sculpture). 1942–45

The Merzbauten

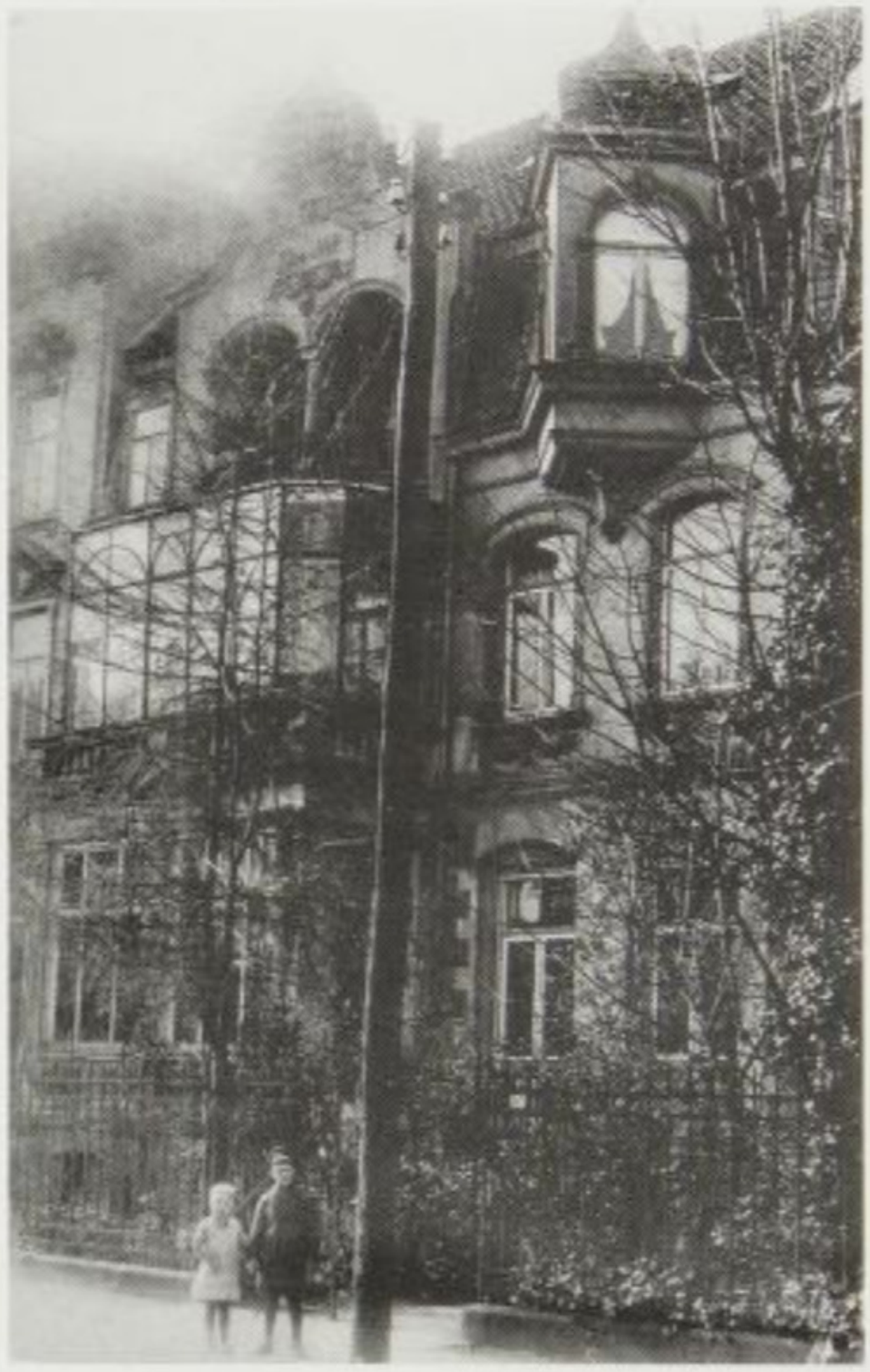
In June 1935, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, arrived without prior notice at Waldhausenstrasse 5 in Hanover to visit the *Merzbau*. Barr was as mystified as he was mesmerized by this cave-like work, and dumbfounded by its unorthodox location, unpretentious materials of wood and rubbish, and sheer immovability. He was sufficiently impressed by what he saw to exhibit photos of the *Merzbau* in MoMA in the following year, but few others responded so confidently to this unprecedented construction. For many years, the Hanover Merzbau and its successors in Norway and England were generally regarded as little more than eccentricities, and it was not until the advent of Environments, Installations, site-specific art and conceptual art that they came to be understood as forerunners of what are now familiar genres. Sadly, only fragments remain of this extraordinary series of artworks that spanned three decades in three different countries and that Schwitters saw as his *Lebenswerk*, his life's work. What did he mean by the term *Merzbau* and why did the idea occupy him for so much of his working life?

The beginnings of the *Merzbau* date back to the early years of Merz, when Schwitters needed a stock of refuse for his collages and assemblages. He was an assiduous collector of rubbish, as his friends testified, and as this material accumulated in his studio, he heaped it into what he called Merz towers or columns. They bore some resemblance to Johannes Baader's *Great Plastic Dio-Dada Drama* of

1920, a bizarre construction that Schwitters saw at the 1920 Berlin Dada Fair, but whether they were supposed to be artworks remains open to doubt: possibly Schwitters couldn't resist giving his stockpiles of debris an artistic flourish, possibly he used them to tease credulous visitors. The history of the early columns is beset with such uncertainties, for the evidence relating to them is vague, unreliable, and often contradictory. Apart from a few photos, we have to rely on the reminiscences of visitors to the artist's studio in the twenties, most written decades later, and, taken as a whole, these yield no coherent picture either of the extent, appearance, development, or location of the first studio constructions. Further confusion arises from the varying accounts of their conception and growth provided by Schwitters's son Ernst; as he was a very young child at this time (he was born in November 1918), these can hardly have been personal memories.

Schwitters himself is of little help in establishing a chronology of the columns, for though a keen self-publicist, he did not promote them at all during the twenties, nor mention them in his correspondence. Yet neither did he keep them secret, for he specifically pointed them out to visitors, who were encouraged to record their impressions in a guest book, offer suggestions, and even make their own additions; contributors included Hannah Höch, El Lissitzky, Naum Gabo, and László Moholy-Nagy. What does emerge from visitors' reports is that the columns required an active observer, for one had to walk round them to see everything, generally with the artist on hand to provide comments and enigmatic remarks. Schwitters was of course an outstanding entertainer, and since no two visitors seem to have received the same treatment, it is possible that his explanations took the form of a performance that he varied to suit and, when the mood took him, shock his audience.

In 1927 Schwitters found a permanent home for his studio in a room at the rear of his parents' apartment on the ground floor of No. 5 Waldhausenstrasse (fig. 68). It was not until 1931, however, when the Great Depression was taking its bitter toll on Germany, that he first made the existence of his studio constructions public. *Merz 21*, the last but one issue of his Merz magazine, contained an afterword entitled *Ich und meine Ziele* (Myself and My Aims), an uncharacteristically defensive manifesto condemning the political



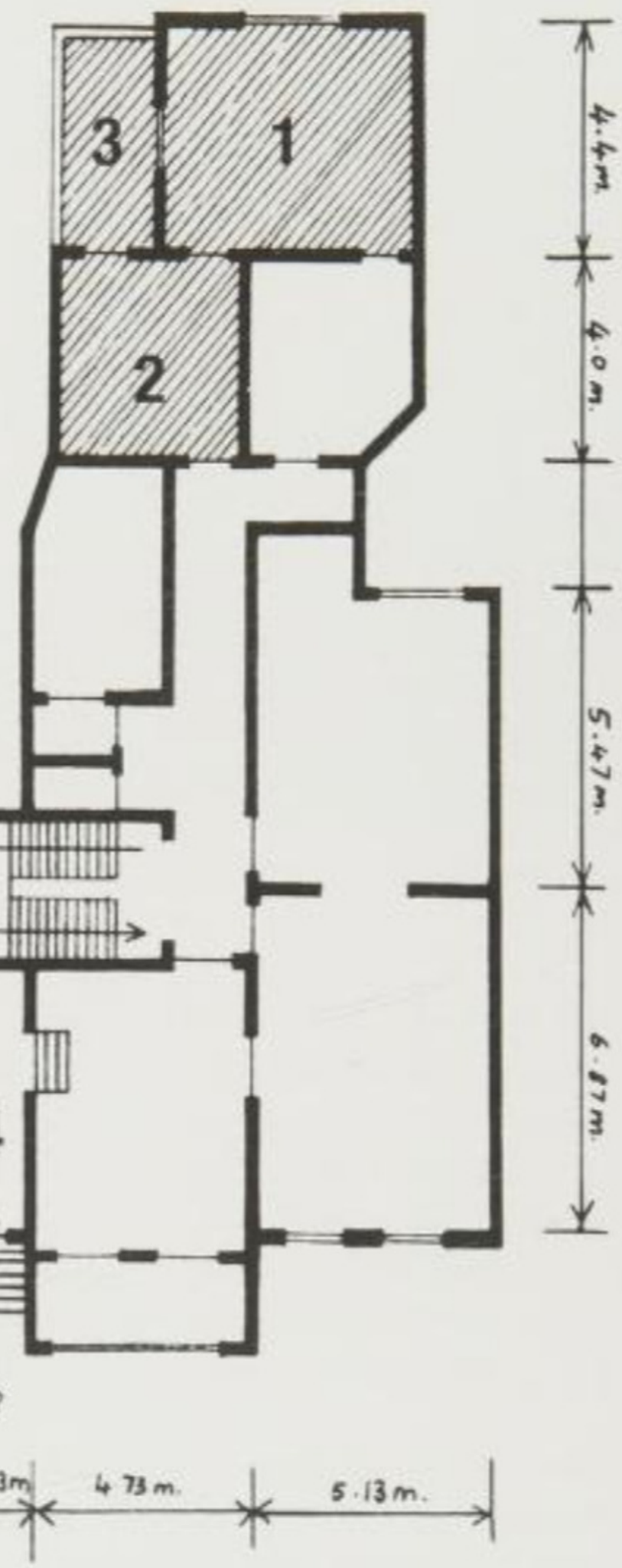
68 No. 5 Waldhausenstrasse, Hanover, around 1926
In the foreground, wearing a cap: Ernst Schwitters.
Schwitters's parents lived on the ground floor, with the main *Merzbau* rooms to the rear. Kurt and Helma lived two floors above in the front apartment, seen here with oriel window.

exploitation of art. It is a curious essay, for despite its title, the word 'Merz' is noticeably lacking. In addition, it includes a section that reads as an awkward, even irrelevant digression—a description of one of his studio columns provocatively named *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)* or *KdeE*, in a paragraph that is a veritable performance in itself. It is a deliberately obscure passage, with no illustrations, and leaves nearly everything to the reader's imagination. Schwitters states, then denies, that the *KdeE* is Dada, Cubist, and Gothic, and notes that its name might—or

might not—be relevant to its content. He delights in describing some of its grottoes, containing everything from tomato-spattered tableaux of lurid murder scenes to prosaic lumps of coal, then pronounces them outdated and beside the point. The architectural vocabulary (cathedral, metropolis, townscape, stairs . . .) makes the grottoes sound spectacular, and it is only from a handful of unpublished photos that we realize how tiny their content was (fig. 15). The column itself seems to have been a sizeable structure by this time; Schwitters describes it as geometrical in appearance, with a floor area of two square metres and a height of three-and-a-half meters. He also explains his construction methods: he incorporates *objets trouvés* into a winding structure of wood and plaster that he then paints and extends to create further space for new content and new forms.

As we know from extant correspondence, there were three columns in his studio at this time, one even larger than the *KdeE*, and more were planned. It would have made an implausible start for a walk-in environment, and evidently it was only after the publication of *Merz 21* that he abandoned the idea of a claustrophobic room dominated by ceiling-high columns. Two years later, the studio had undergone a radical transformation; the columns were no longer discernible as discrete units, but had been integrated into a complex interconnected structure of wood, plaster, and glass. In early 1933, Schwitters moved his workplace to an adjacent room and announced that this interior was finished. Its name—first recorded by Helma Schwitters in April 1933—was the *Merzbau*.[6] It was this idea of what she called a "single great sculpture" that was to inform all further developments of the work and shape our awareness of what we understand as a *Merzbau* today.

Schwitters was so elusive about his studio columns that he possibly wished them to remain ambivalent, unclassifiable objects, but in 1933, he made it clear that his new *Merzbau*, though it could neither be sold nor exhibited, was a work of art. He had it photographed by a professional museum photographer named Wilhelm Redemann (figs. 70.1–70.3), and published an illustrated article in *abstraction-création*, the journal of an international artist group based in Paris. In style, it bore nothing in common with the account of the *KdeE* in *Merz 21*:



69 No. 5 Waldhausenstrasse, Hanover, ground floor plan showing the main *Merzbau* rooms:
1. First room, 1927–36
2. Second room 1933–36
3. Balcony, 1935–36
4. Entrance from the street
The remaining rooms were living quarters.

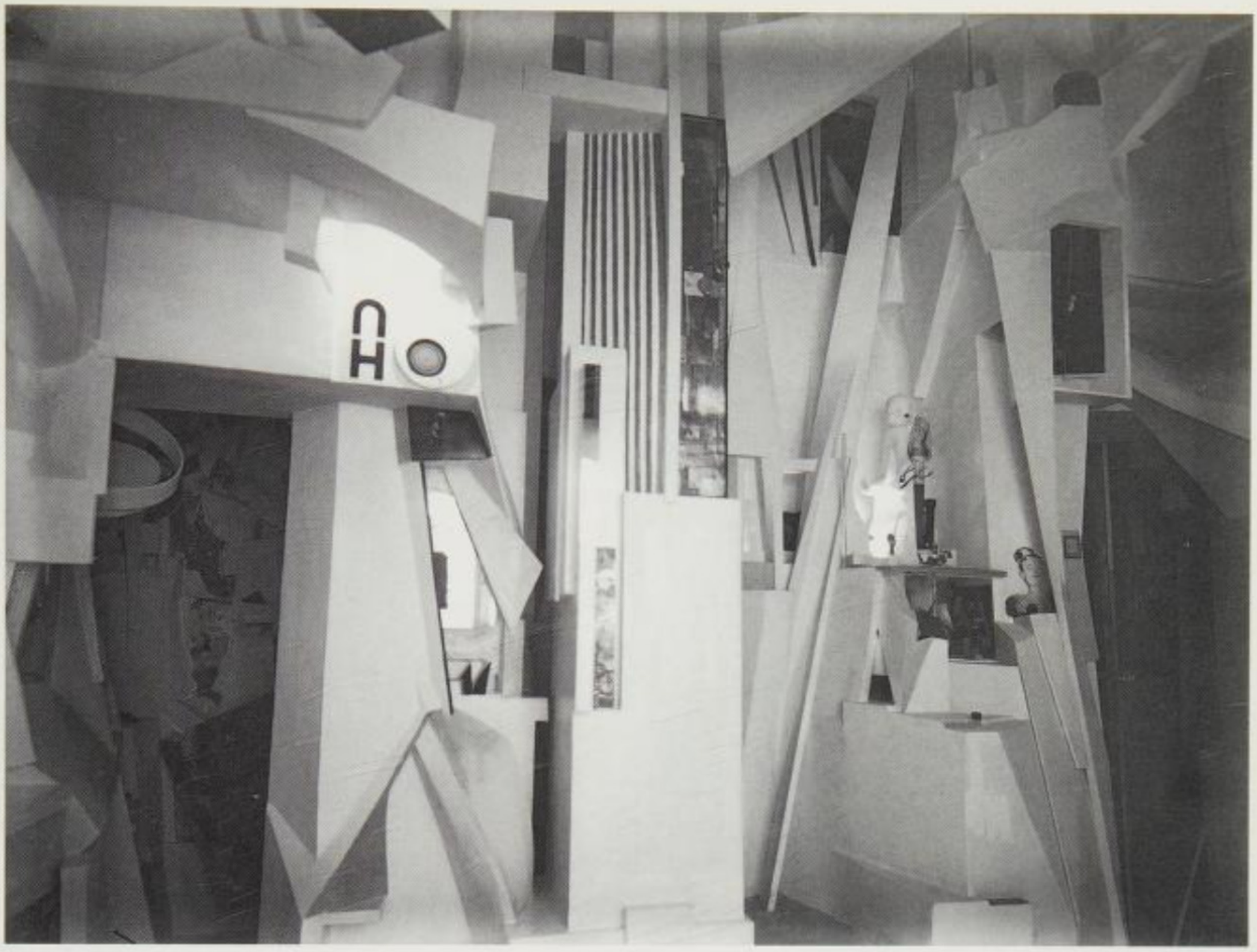
70 *Merzbau*, Hanover, 1933. Detail views: 70.1 *Grand Group*

70.2 *Merzbau*, Hanover, 1933, *Blue Window*

The Merzbau is the construction of an interior from sculptural forms and colors. In the glazed grottoes are Merz compositions arranged as a cubic volume and which blend with the white cubic forms to form an interior. Each part of the interior serves as an intermediary element to its neighboring part. There are no details which constitute a unified and circumscribed composition. (Lach 5, p. 354)

If this was the only text Schwitters ever published on the *Merzbau*, it was because its completion, in the sense of the kind of sculptural interior illustrated in *abstraction-création*, coincided with the enforcement of harsh cultural restrictions by the newly elected National Socialist government. From early 1933, Schwitters's work was reviled in Nazi publications and his abstract pictures displayed in traveling exhibitions of so-called "degenerate art." In the twenties he had been involved in almost every area of avant-garde practice; by 1934, he had been robbed of all prospects of pursuing his former careers. With time on his hands and living in increasing isolation, he began to extend the *Merzbau* with the aid of a glazier, a carpenter, and an electrician. In addition to the original room, located in the respectable domestic setting of Waldhausenstrasse 5, *Merzbau* subsidiaries took shape in even more improbable sites in the house such as the attic, the balcony, the space beneath (including an underground cistern) and possibly the cellar (fig. 69). Its final extent is unknown, but judging by Schwitters's later (and often conflicting) statements, by 1936 five or more new *Merzbau* rooms were spread around Waldhausenstrasse 5, all constructed in the style of the first. It was a courageous, if not foolhardy, activity, for he had every reason to fear the consequences if the *Merzbau* were discovered by the authorities. By 1936 he had whitewashed those windows that revealed its presence to the outside world—a precautionary measure he found unutterably depressing.

Most of those who saw the *Merzbau* in the thirties were either close friends or visitors from abroad, among them Barr, Arp, the art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker, Paul Bowles, Philip Johnson,



70.3 *Merzbau*, Hanover, 1933, *Stairway Entrance Side*

and Schwitters's American patron Katherine Dreier—one of the few people, he wrote, who could understand the *Merzbau*. He had indeed created such a groundbreaking and innovatory work that it remained incomprehensible to most visitors. Without the benefit of as yet uninvented terms such as "Environment" and "Installation," words literally failed him as he struggled to explain that the *Merzbau* was art that surrounded you, for even those who saw it rarely grasped the idea that this was "not only a room construction, but also a sculpture in space, which one can enter, in which one can go for a walk!"[7] As he tried to make clear to Barr:

> In order to counter any wrong impression, I must explicitly explain that my working method is not a question of interior design, like a decorative style, and that I am not constructing an interior for people to live in, for the new architects can do that far better. I am building an abstract (cubist) sculpture into which people can go. From the directions and movements of the constructed surfaces, there emanate imaginary planes which act as directions and movements in space and which intersect in empty space. The suggestive impact of the sculpture is based on the fact that people themselves cross these imaginary planes as they go into the sculpture. It is the dynamic of the impact that is important to me. I am building a composition without boundaries, and each individual part is at the same time a frame for the neighboring parts; everything is reciprocal.[8]

Here Schwitters describes the *Merzbau* as a flowing structure, the generator of a force field that fluctuates as one moves round the interior; the raw materials of the *Merzbau* now include a radiating space that interacts with the beholder. This was not an entirely original idea, for in the twenties, artists and architects such as El Lissitzky, Naum Gabo, Theo van Doesburg, and Mies van der Rohe had all worked with the idea of space as a sculptural, pictorial, or architectural element. But for all the experimentation with space

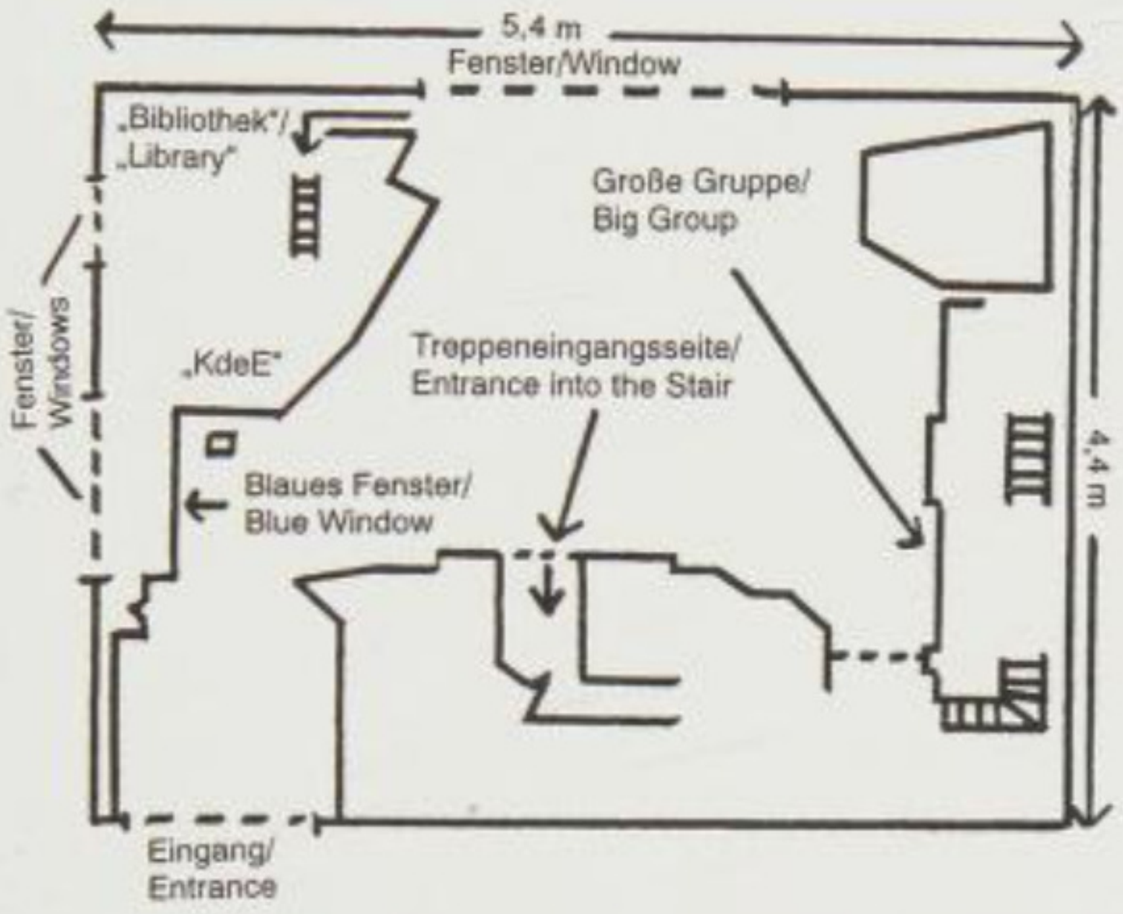
71 *Grotto in Memory of Molde*, 1935

as an active component of art, no contemporary artist had created a sculptural environment to compare with the *Merzbau*, and certainly not in such a vulnerable location, far removed from any framework that might identify it as art.

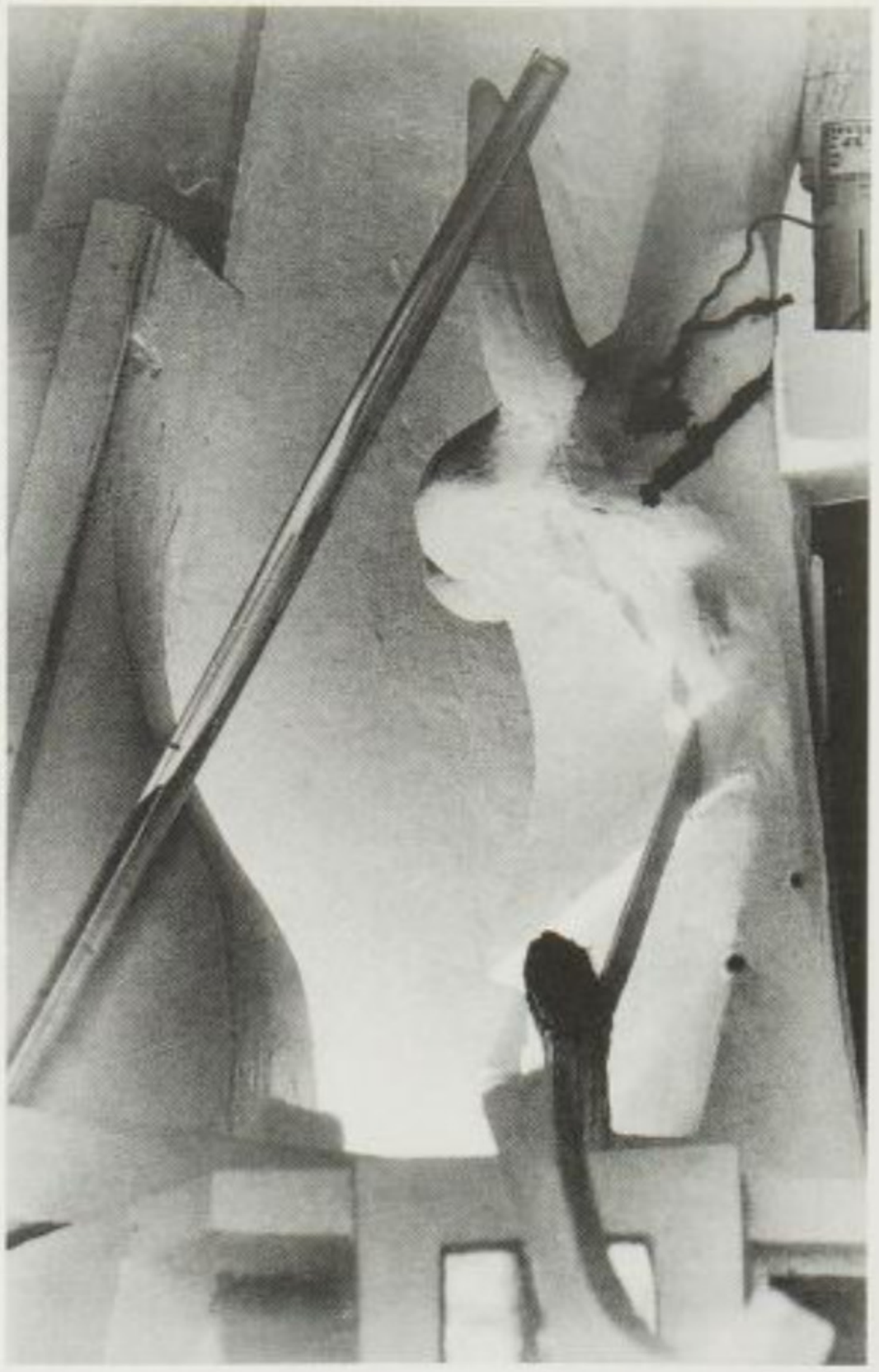
The *Merzbau* was far more than just a sculptural interior whose effect relied on the viewer's interaction with imaginary planes. It also contained a collection of abstract pictures by contemporary artists, and, according to one visitor, Schwitters used the room as a theater for recitals of his literary works. He positioned freestanding sculptures at salient points (fig. 60) and continued to insert colorful grottoes into the white plaster structures (fig. 71). Moveable elements allowed for adaptable constellations, and glazed surfaces and mirrors provided unexpected reflections (fig. 72). A variable lighting system threw different sections into stark relief, while a blue window bathed the entrance in a solemn glow. The main window, which took up almost a whole wall, framed a view of the adjacent woods that cast a dappled light over the smooth white surfaces. What is not apparent at first sight is that hardly any constructions were flush with the walls. Behind them, stairways led to a tiny library, walkways, and niches with seats, concealed areas where one was both inside and outside the Merzbau and by means of hatches and apertures could view those who considered themselves viewers (figs. 73, 74). The multiple perspectives of the *Merzbau* also included a shifting between, and blurring of, the private and public domain, not only with respect to its location as a public work in a domestic setting but also from private objects on show, such as a flask of Schwitters's urine and the death mask of his first-born son Gerd (fig. 11), who had died in 1916 at the age of a week.[9]

Despite the destruction of the *Merzbau* in 1943 in an Allied bombing raid, enough documentary and archival evidence remains to convey a vivid picture of what visitors would have seen in the thirties. This evidence is also sufficient to refute some of the persistent legends that pepper standard literature about the *Merzbau* even today. To list just a few that can be unreservedly dismissed on the basis of verifiable sources: the Merzbau was not located in Schwitters's living quarters, let alone occupied by the artist and his family or by pet guinea pigs, and its content did not consist largely of a collection of repellent objects, obscene material, and scurrilous souvenirs appropriated from friends. The *Merzbau*, may, as Schwitters's colleague Kate Steinitz speculated, have harbored secret compartments, but by definition it is futile to guess at their content (unless we believe Hannah Höch, who wrote that they contained the artist's stocks of rubbish). The anecdote that Schwitters pierced the ceiling and evicted tenants on the floor above to accommodate his expanding columns is easily disprovable, and, as

72 *Untitled (Detail with Madonna)*, around 1936

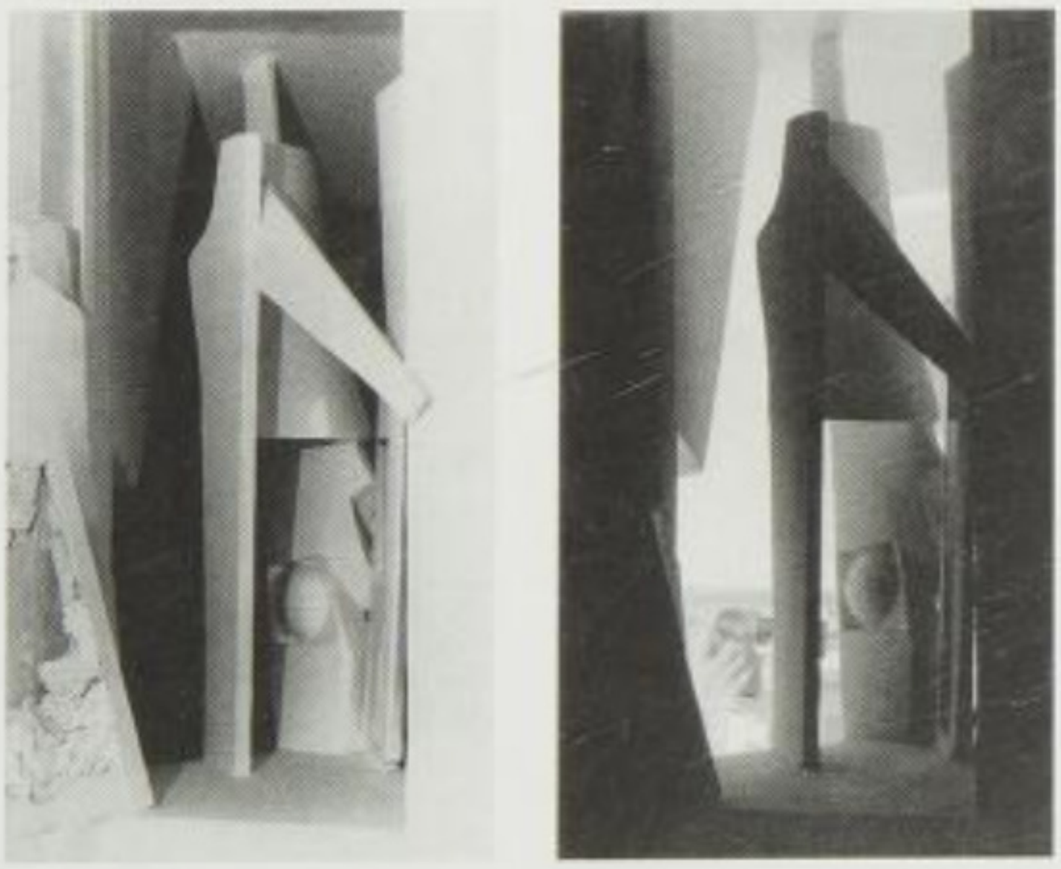


73 Sketch of the *Merzbau* reconstruction: floor plan of the principal room (fig. 69, room 1)



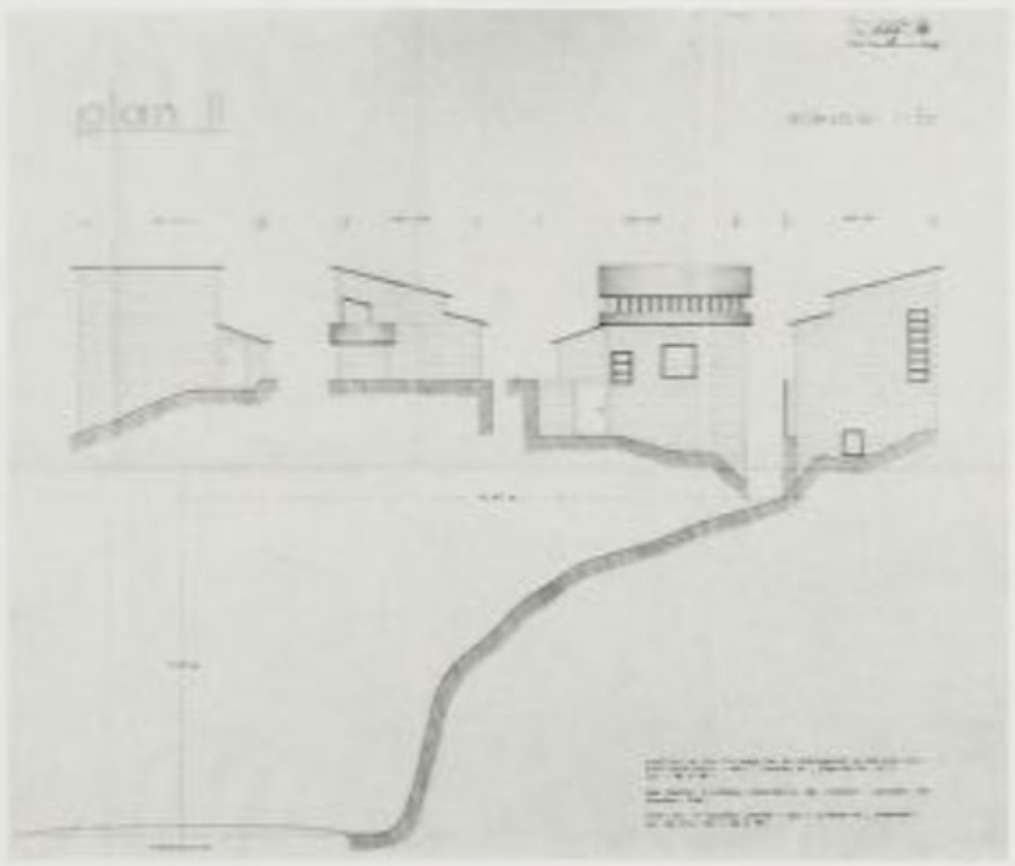
75 *Untitled (Grotto with Cow Horn)*, 1932

six families lived at Waldhausenstrasse 5 (not including resident maids), the *Merzbau* can never have filled the whole house. Depictions of the *Merzbau* as no more than a preposterous extravaganza make a good story, but are just as baseless as the tale that it was a surreptitious undertaking divulged only to a select few; if the *Merzbau* had been a clandestine project, Schwitters would hardly have sent photos to international publications and to MoMA. If he was wary about publicizing the *Merzbau* after 1933, it was because Hitler's speeches at party conferences contained ever more explicit and menacing threats to the old Weimar avant-garde.



74 *Merzbau*, detail views (apparently from the stairway entrance side), with varied lighting, around 1936

In 1934 it had occurred to Helma Schwitters that if the *Merzbau* could extend to other rooms, it could spread elsewhere—even to Berlin, she joked to Hannah Höch. And if Berlin, why not New York? The *Merzbau* suddenly revealed itself as more than a single work in a permanent location; it could be a mobile, repeatable concept, as adaptable as Merz itself to other times, other places. In late 1936 Schwitters wrote to numerous influential acquaintances expressing his fears for the *Merzbau* and pleading for an opportunity to construct a new version in the United States or Switzerland—all in vain. Barr himself could not help, and the MoMA exhibition that should have marked a new start for the *Merzbau* instead marked its end. Even before the show closed, Schwitters had left Germany, never to return. Helma subsequently blocked off the main *Merzbau* rooms, and they remained inaccessible until a stray bomb blew the house apart in 1943.



76 Plan of the *Haus am Bakken*, drawn by Ernst Schwitters in 1938 for the local planning department

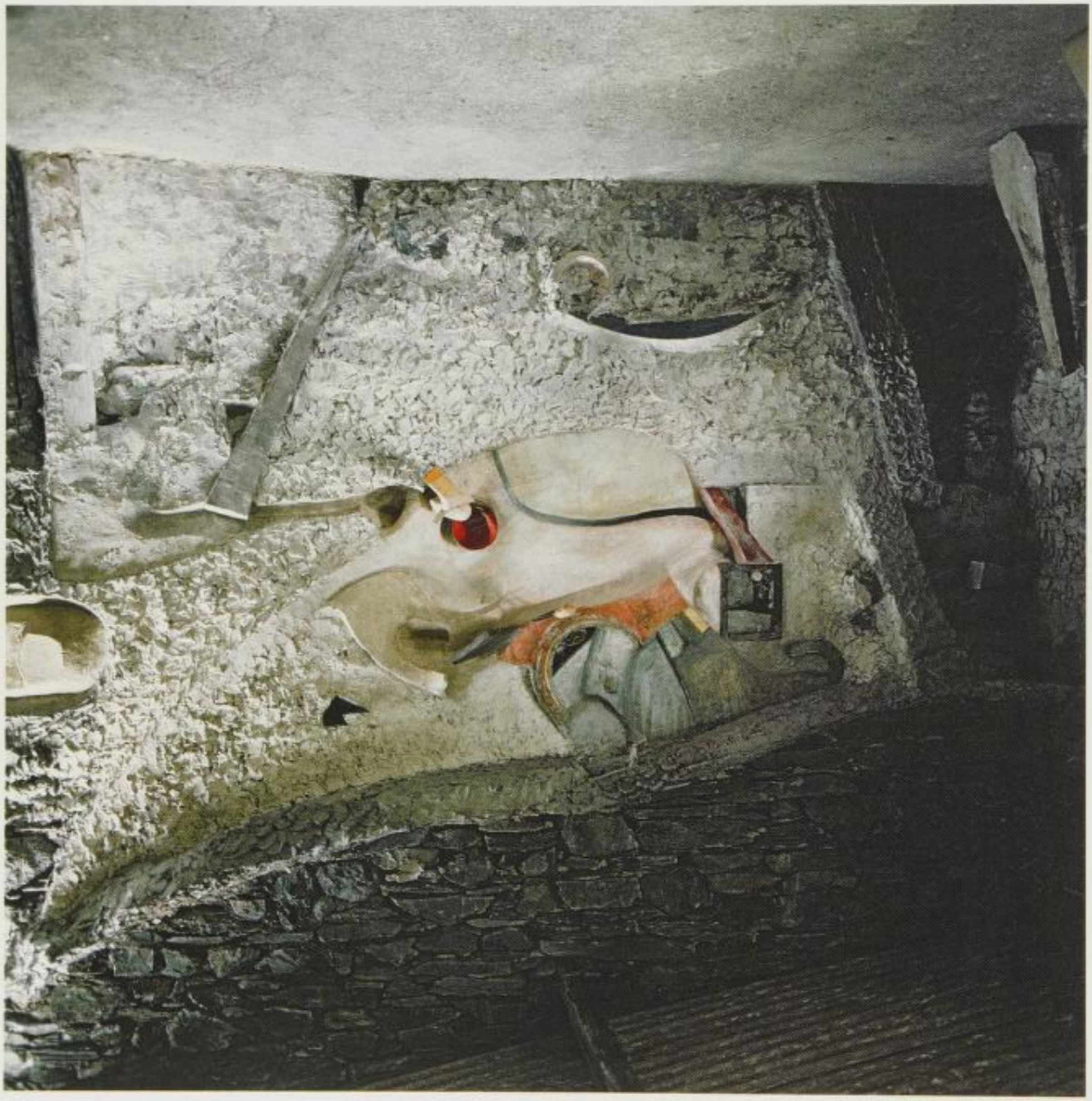
Fearing that the Hanover *Merzbau* was doomed to destruction, and with no prospects of an alternative, Schwitters decided to build a second *Merzbau* in exile in Norway in 1937, in the full knowledge that no one there would understand it. In autumn he began to construct the shell of a studio behind his apartment in Lysaker near Oslo. It was an exhausting task and took almost a year to complete; he carried heavy planks down the steeply sloping garden, sawed them to size, and nailed them in place over a base of bare rock. In mid-1938 he began to plan the interior, modelling it closely on its predecessor in Hanover. There were sweeping white plaster forms, brightly colored grottoes, freestanding sculptures, a white sculpted floor, and, as there was no electricity, numerous windows. In his new *Haus am Bakken* (house on the slope), however, Schwitters was in no position to exploit the ambigous teetering between public and private that had enlivened its predecessor. From the first there were no critical observers, no colleagues to offer fresh ideas, none of the seething urban tensions that had provided the original dynamic of Merz. As with the late stages of the Hanover *Merzbau*, Schwitters constantly mourned the lack of visitors, and, with hardly anyone to sign a guest book, he instead included an *Atelierbuch* (studio book), hoping to fill it with photos and texts that friends could send by post. More than once the authorities threatened to demolish his *Haus am Bakken*, a prospect he found unbearable. "I'm often totally in despair that I just don't succeed in finding a site for my monumental works," he wrote in 1939; at the first opportunity his new *Merzbau* would have to migrate southwards, for no one in Norway could understand the idea of a sculptural interior.[10] Over-optimistically, he had persuaded himself that he could make his *Haus am Bakken* portable, but as work proceeded, he realized how impossible this plan was (fig. 76).

A further, entirely private interior that is often identified as a *Merzbau*—though Schwitters never referred to it as such—still stands today in Molde Fjord. In 1934, he rented a stone hut on the island of Hjertøya and gradually converted it into a living space (fig. 16, 18). He returned to the hut each summer and by 1939 had covered much of the interior with collaging, found objects, and geometrical constructions—a kind of practical *Merzbau* whose grottoes contained everyday articles like sugar bowls. After 1940 the contents of the hut began to disintegrate, and not until many decades later were attempts made to preserve the remnants of Schwitters's work (fig. 77).

Back in Oslo, the *Haus am Bakken* was nearing completion when Nazi troops invaded Norway in 1940 and Schwitters fled to England. Ailing and virtually penniless in wartime London, he was devastated to hear that the Hanover *Merzbau* had been destroyed. It was not until the war was over that he resumed contact with friends in Hanover and gained the mistaken impression that parts could be saved. In 1946 he sent an urgent plea to a Pittsburgh businessman named Oliver M. Kaufmann, begging for $3,000 (equivalent to about $35,000 today) to restore "a studio, called Merzbau." "It was the work of my life," Schwitters explained; "I worked twenty years on it."[11] Why an artist should work for so long on (rather than in) a studio with its own name and require such a vast sum to reconstruct a workplace surely puzzled Kaufmann; possibly it was the writer's heart-rending admission that "I fight for it in desperation, like an animal for its child" that moved him to arrange for the money to be transferred to the artist through the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Once again, everything told against Schwitters, from poor health to red tape, and his dream of a return

77 Entrance to the hut on Hjertøya, 2008

78 *Hanover Merzbau*, reconstruction, entrance, 1983



79 Relief wall in the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, 1947

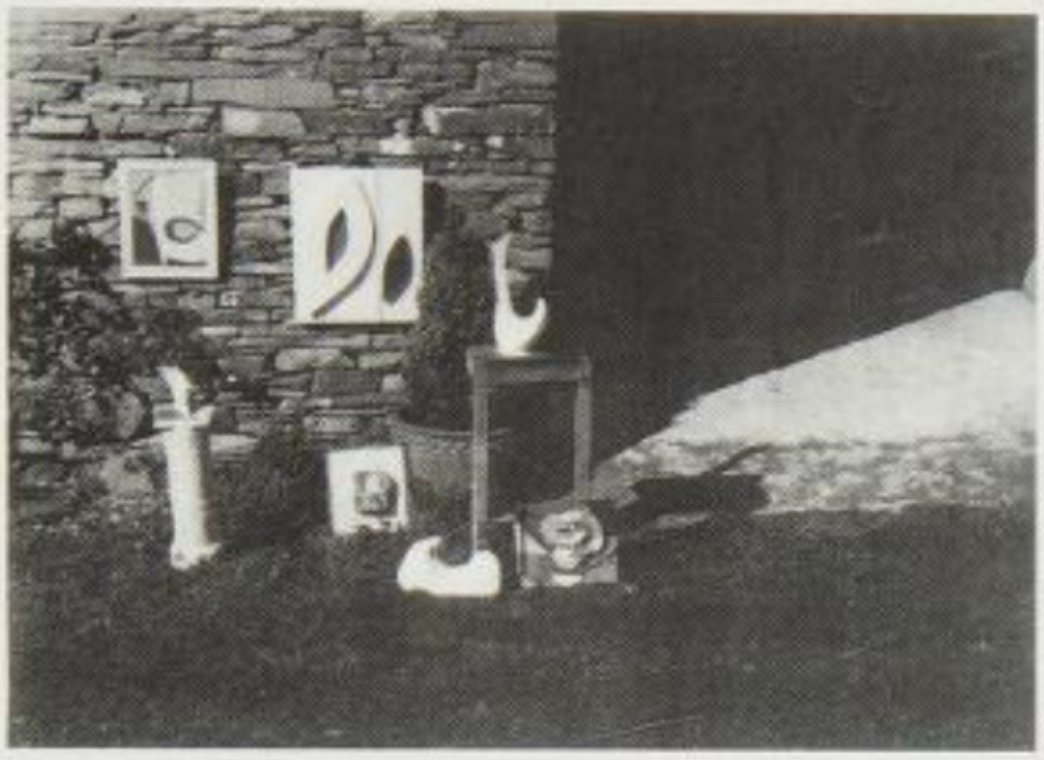
80 View of the relief wall in the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, 1947

to Hanover slowly faded. It says much for the trustees of MoMA and their estimation of his work that they finally agreed to finance any of his plans, whether these involved the restoration of the *Merzbau* in Hanover or Lysaker or the creation of a new one.

In mid-August 1947, Schwitters began work on a new *Merzbau* in a stone barn in Elterwater, on the site of an old gunpowder factory. To his delight there was no need for secrecy, for Harry Pierce, the owner of the land, intended to open the surrounding, newly-laid-out gardens to the public, with the *Merz Barn* serving as a café and art gallery. As always, Schwitters took as his starting-point found objects, which in this out-of-the-way location consisted of fragments such as a broken cartwheel, twine, a tin can, and tree roots (fig. 79). What the barn's final state would have been must remain conjecture, for he fell terminally ill in December 1947, having devoted (with the aid of friends) less than four months to a work that he estimated would take three years to complete (fig. 80).

Katherine Dreier and Herbert Read drew up plans to transform the barn into a memorial to Schwitters by removing his grave to its interior, but this idea was rejected by Ernst Schwitters. Immediately after Schwitters's death, to Wantee's dismay, Pierce demolished part of the sculptured interior of the barn. In 1955 he opened it to the public, though what remained of Schwitters's work was rapidly deteriorating. Most of the movable content (fig. 81) was subsequently transferred to other locations and in 1965, on the instructions of artist Richard Hamilton, the 25-ton sculptured end wall was transported to the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle, where it is now on permanent display.

As with the hut on Hjertøya, the *Merz Barn* had to wait for over sixty years before it was given the attention it deserved. The Lysaker *Merzbau* is lost forever, for it burned down in 1951 and no photographs or plans of the interior exist. In 1983 the Swiss stage designer Peter Bissegger completed a reconstruction of the first Hanover *Merzbau* room, based mainly on the wide-angle photos taken immediately after its completion in 1933 (fig. 78). The reconstruction, now housed in the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, allows us to acquaint ourselves with the *Merzbau* of 1933 as Schwitters's initial response to a tragic epoch that opposed the integrative, communicative principles of Merz in every way. Wherever we look, we see signs of lost flow and exchange. The constructions facing the entrance are topped by a pointless stopcock, while below, spidery black twigs clutch at the plaster. On the opposite wall, the immobile coils of a huge drive belt spiral around a dark exit leading to a niche where redundant tubes from a pneumatic postal system prop up the plaster cast of the head of a dead baby. Nearby is an image of *Fromme Helene* (Devout Helena), Wilhelm Busch's anti-heroine who suffered a disastrous end; above it a tiny figure is strung up inside a grotto. Yet the whole is also a boldly conceived, captivating, multifaceted space that invites exploration, created from a myriad commonplace fragments and patterned with shimmering light from the woodlands outside. This was Schwitters's kingdom, as he called it once, with a potential he could hardly have envisaged when he described the *Merzbau* as "finished" in 1933.



81 Sculptures outside the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, around 1948

The early columns are best understood as the focus of the artist's investigation of the possibilities of amalgamating the avant-garde and everyday life, for at first there was no clear dividing line between studio, artwork and environment. It was, however, the concept of a sculptural interior—so baffling to Schwitters's contemporaries—that informed the Hanover *Merzbau* and its successors, and it originated at a time when both democracy and the former avant-garde community in Germany had collapsed, leaving Schwitters in effect an exile in his own country.

Why did he change course so abruptly in the early 1930s? The non-specific was inherent in Merz, which eschewed any clear cut program, and nothing exemplified Merz better than the first studio columns; to publicize them would have entailed an irreversible act of temporal, spatial and interpretative definition. But as the new decade progressed, Schwitters was faced with an inescapable obligation to take a stand in Germany's radically polarized society. In *Merz 21* we find him warily allowing us tantalizing glimpses of the *KdeE*. When the columns began to crystallize into a sculptural environment, it was because the avant garde's cherished vision of a fusion of art and life needed reconsideration in a world that he rejected, and that rejected him. From 1933, he moved his workplace from the first room to create an artwork (to remove a studio from an artwork rather than vice versa being a prize example of Schwitters's looking-glass logic.)

The *Merzbauten* were, in the widest sense, works of exile, and are often described in terms of a refuge. Yet Schwitters's decision to expand the Hanover *Merzbau* after the momentous year of 1933, in utter disregard of the regime, looks more defiant than defensive, while the Lysaker *Merzbau* caused him constant problems with officialdom, even arousing suspicions that he was a spy. His exertions on both resulted in considerable health problems and in the few months that he worked on the *Merz Barn*, he subjected himself to extremes of physical strain that undoubtedly contributed to his death. In the *Merzbauten* he resolutely maintained the integrative ideas of Merz to the end of his life, during a dismal period when he and his work were alienated and humiliated as never before. Reciprocity, response and feedback were key factors in the evolution of his studio constructions, which emerged in the Weimar Republic's crisis-ridden society and continued to proliferate when no artistic discourse remained save that of the Nazi dystopia. Schwitters attempted to retain such potential in his *Merzbauten* however much the menace of dictatorship and the limitations of exile told against him, and when prevented from entering into any kind of a dialogue with a hostile or indifferent world, he worked instead with natural objects and the fluctuating effects of light and shadow. In view of the multiple restrictions imposed on him in Norway, it is unsurprising that the Lysaker *Merzbau* resembled the last stages of its predecessor in Hanover. Given his constant endeavors to work from and with his environment, the *Merz Barn* was destined to become a rural, organic structure. If instead, he had been able to realize his dream of a commission in America, it would surely have resulted in a far less modest work; as it is, a dazzling New York *Merzbau* must remain a figment of our imagination.

Given the crucial give-and-take nature of the *Merzbauten*, what happens if we consider them in terms of what Schwitters's world made of him? In the narratives of the unsaleable Hanover and Lysaker *Merzbauten*—both constantly under threat, both in inexorable retreat from the world of commerce and communication—we find themes of self-reflection and isolation common to the avant-garde art of the thirties and forties. Yet it was one of the strengths of Merz that it started from the given, however inapt and deficient in aesthetic qualities. Just as the found object was a vital component

82 *Untitled (Zeitu)*, around 1919

of Merz, so found space, with all the tensions it involved, was an integral part of the *Merzbauten*. Even the first columns had been situated in rooms belonging to Schwitters's parents, and the Hanover *Merzbau* subsisted far more perilously under a regime that denied its populace any right to a private sphere. The *Haus am Bakken* stood in the back garden of a rented apartment in a country in which Schwitters had only temporary right of residence, and like the *Merz Barn*, was the work of a refugee who never enjoyed the luxury of a space of his own. In this sense, the ruined Hanover *Merzbau*, the lowly Hjertøya hut, the hapless *Haus am Bakken* and the mouldering porridge sculptures on the Isle of Man serve as a sad reflection and silent indictment of the inhumane conditions of a wartime world. In the *Merz Barn*, Schwitters began a sculptural interior more directly poised between art and life—a withdrawn and humble life for sure, but one that at least granted him a modicum of acceptance.

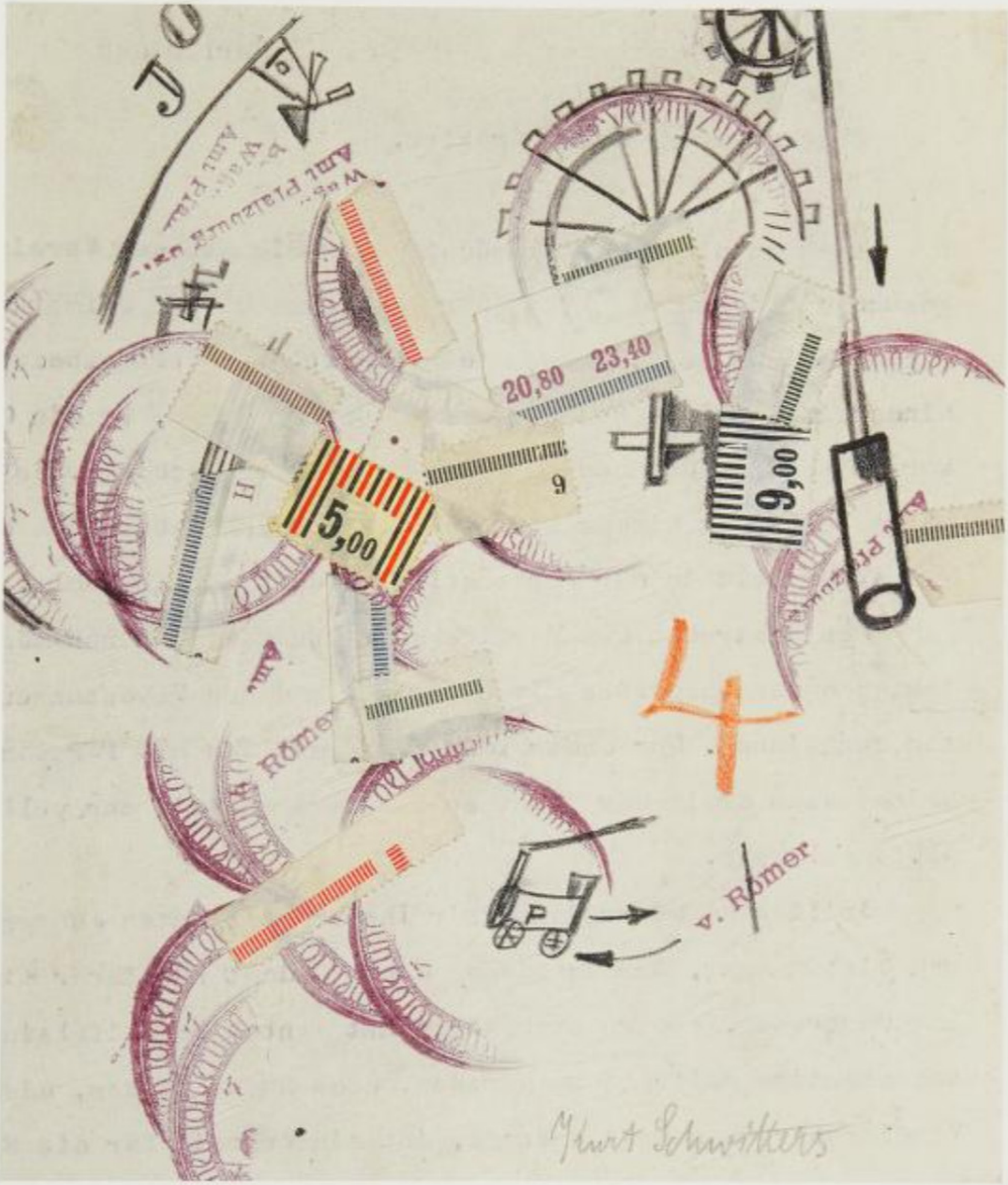
Schwitters's insecure status in Nazi Germany had led him to think hard about the legacy he hoped to leave to later generations. It was not, he decided, his collages that best represented him, but the *Merzbauten*, those most democratic of artworks. All the *Merzbauten* were constructed around worthless and fragmentary materials and disregarded all cultural and institutional hierarchies. In all their manifestations they privileged the dynamic over the static, the reproducible over the unique and the everyday environment over the museum or exhibition. They were interactive, hybrid sites that allowed for diverse input, and their intermedial form means that however we attempt to situate them in one artistic practice, they are always open to valid interpretation in terms of another. Their space was a sculptural element in which the beholder played an active part, and even when finished, they retained a potential for spontaneity as fragments that could be absorbed into a greater whole. Today they seem like guidelines for peaceful globalization, the ultimate example of the message of Merz as summed up by the artist himself: "Merz means establishing relationships, best of all between all the things in the world." (Lach 5, p. 187)

Minor Modes of Merz Composition

Given the ambitious scope of the Merzbauten, it is worth remembering that other sorts of Merz art can be surprisingly small: in the original, many Merz pictures are little bigger than postcards. Likewise, Schwitters's oeuvre consists of both long-term and short-term types of experimental production. Among the latter we may count the so-called "Aphorisms," the *Stempelzeichnungen*, the i-drawings, and the lithographs.

"Aphorisms" was the term used by the artist in 1918-19 to designate certain very small drawings; later he used it to refer to miniature collages, whose virtue lies in their tininess and the consequent skill manifested in their handling. These seeming trivia provide us with a reminder of the artist's cultivation of Merz craftsmanship, which sustained intricacy and accuracy even within severe constraints of scale (fig. 82).

Dating to around 1919-21, the drawings known as *Stempelzeichnungen*, or rubber-stamp drawings, are images derived from office materials. Schwitters appears to have borrowed rubber stamps from various office desks, such as those of Der Sturm in Berlin and his own advertising bureau in Hanover. *Untitled (With Red 4)* (1919, fig. 83) comes from this brief series, in which verbal formulae of minimal interest—and certainly bereft of any poetry—are absolved of their routine semantic duties and thrown into uninhibited constellations. Typographical units turn into purely visual components, as when a circular rubber stamp is used to stamp out the



83 *Untitled (With Red 4)*, 1919

84 *Drawing I 7 All Sorts.*, 1920

fractured message "Verein zur Ges Foto erung der" in mauve ink. Other phrases such as "Der Sturm," "Die Redaktion" (editorial office), "Belegexemplar" (voucher copy), and "Drucksache" (printed matter) designate aspects of the publishing business, but no more. Inks of differing color underline the transfer from one context to another. The artist also inserts freehand figures—arrows, a coffee-grinder, a droll locomotive, and a windmill—which introduce the flavor of a jolly cartoon strip. A bold numeral in orange crayon directs attention to other, smaller numerals on the page, and these combine with the hastily smudged circles to suggest a symbolic representation of high speed and technological precision.

The main cycle of Schwitters's so-called i-drawings dates to 1920, though there was another wave of them in 1932. These are nothing other than readymade images and textures retrieved from

86 *Untitled (Blue-Grey Merz Drawing)*, 1924–27

85 *Untitled (Black Spot)*, 1932

magazines and other print sources. They involve no secondary adjustment or complex treatment by the artist, their effectiveness relying purely on the fact of his choice. Such works represent the purest gesture of *appropriation* in that someone else's expression is being hijacked, and pressed unaltered into service within the Merz scheme. In fact, the i-drawings tend to be mostly soiled papers found in the cellar of the Molling printshop in Hanover. They were smudged, overprinted, or otherwise judged redundant by the printer—but not by Schwitters, who reveled in salvaging them from the trash can (fig. 84).

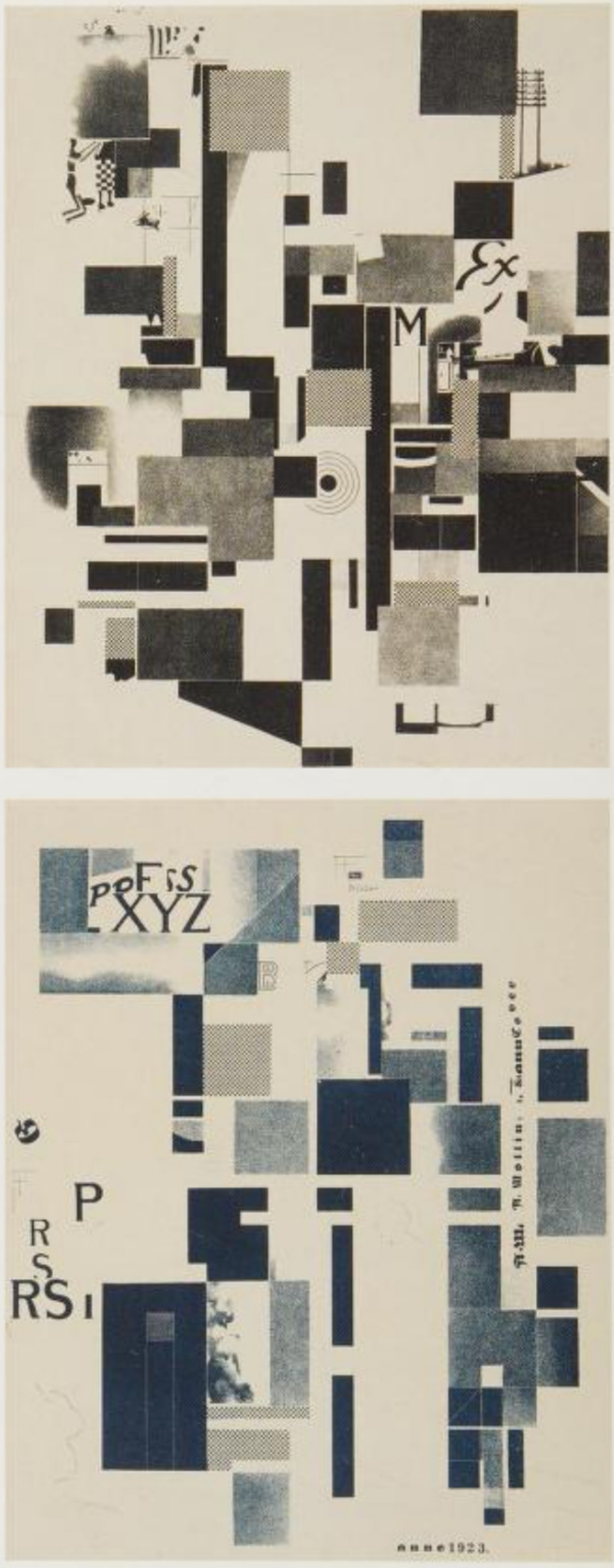
The artist explains that such images constitute an intuitive form of individual expression, the documentation of a specific moment of spontaneous recognition, conjured out of incoherence and

waste. The pure conjunction of eye and mind is thus conceived as a sufficient basis for artmaking, a split-second act of de-formulation and reformulation in which the external image shares, so to speak, a glance of complicity with its discoverer. The i-drawings thus correspond to a Surrealist-style notion of the untouched readymade or found object.[12] It is notable that several reflect an alternative trend in abstract art, one which veers away from geometric Constructivism, as witness the wilder forms of *Untitled (Black Spot)* (1932, fig. 85). This anarchic mode could be said to have affinities with the Surrealist Max Ernst's *frottage* imagery, or even the textural lithographs of Jean Dubuffet's *Empreintes* cycle. One may sense a wistful melancholy about *Untitled (Blue-Grey Merz Drawing)* (ca. 1924–27, fig. 86), a mood transmitted through emotive coloring and purely accidental allusions to twigs and windows. These make it a somewhat nostalgic piece, while also drawing it away from the more stringent criteria of non-representational abstraction. Sceptical viewers, of course, will refuse to countenance any such creative reading and see only a piece of litter. Merz, we have learnt, thrives on the very border between opposed categories.

The lithographs of the early nineteen-twenties represent the marriage of Merz procedures with the professional printing techniques familiar to Schwitters the typographer and professional publicity consultant. In 1920, a set of eight lithographs was published under the heading *The Cathedral*. Its imagery includes machine parts and hand-drawn motifs. In 1923, Schwitters produced his *Merz Portfolio*, a set of six lithographs in which the suave finish of capital letters and orthogonal shapes, imprinted crisply upon a roomy blank background, seems a far cry from the muddy claustrophobia of his exactly contemporary collages (fig. 87).

A prolific correspondent throughout his life, Schwitters occasionally produced collaged postcards, using ordinary picture postcards that he subjected to tampering and over-writing. Such items from the twenties often bear his own photoportrait, that of a smart young businessman presenting himself in an act of self-advertisement. Some, sent to friends, are adorned with collaged supplements, usually in a joking mode (fig. 45).

Schwitters's compulsive collage-making led to alternative productions such as the printed matter pasted in the interior of the



87 *MERZ 3. MERZ PORTFOLIO, FIRST PORTFOLIO OF THE MERZVERLAG, 6 lithographs*, 1923

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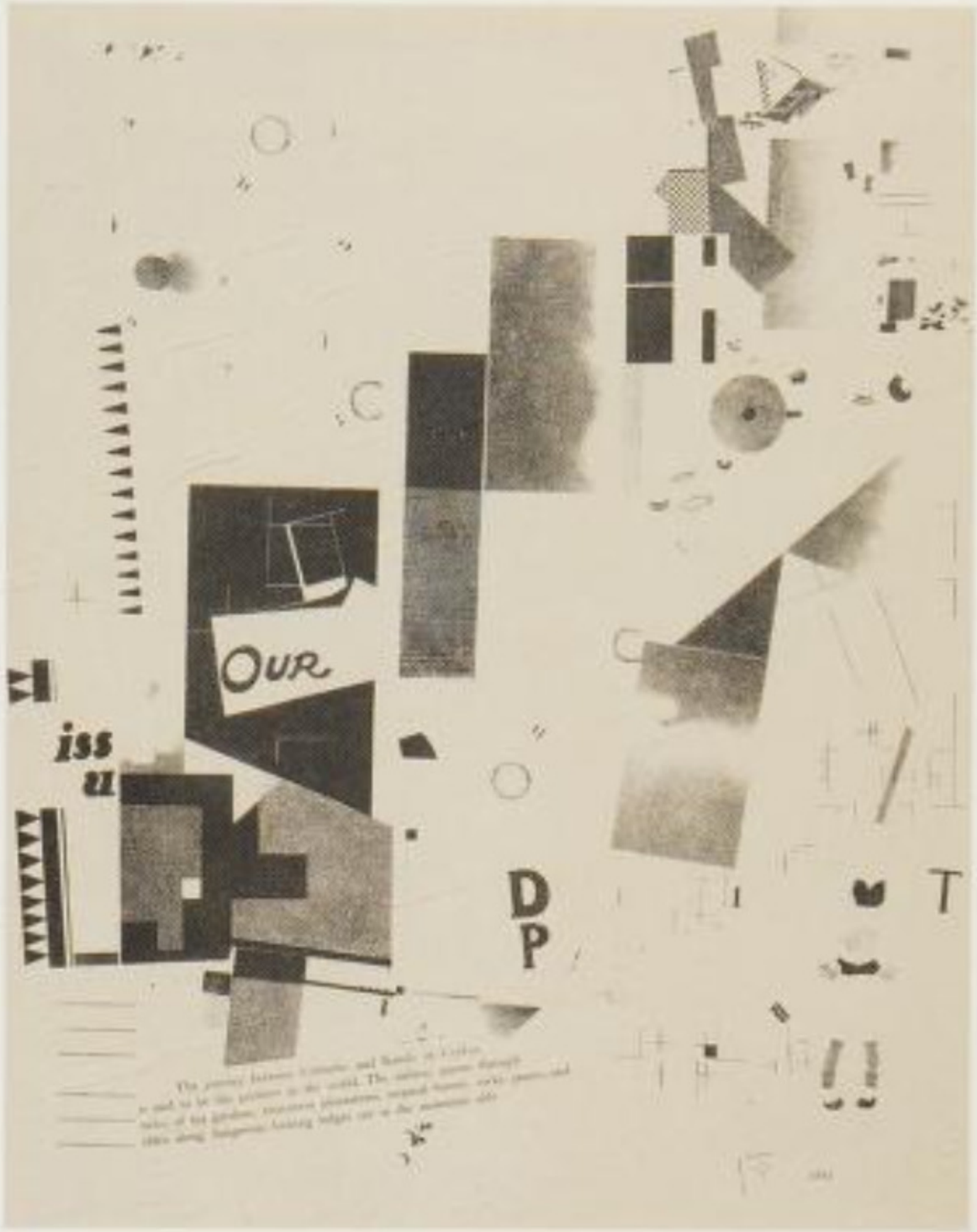
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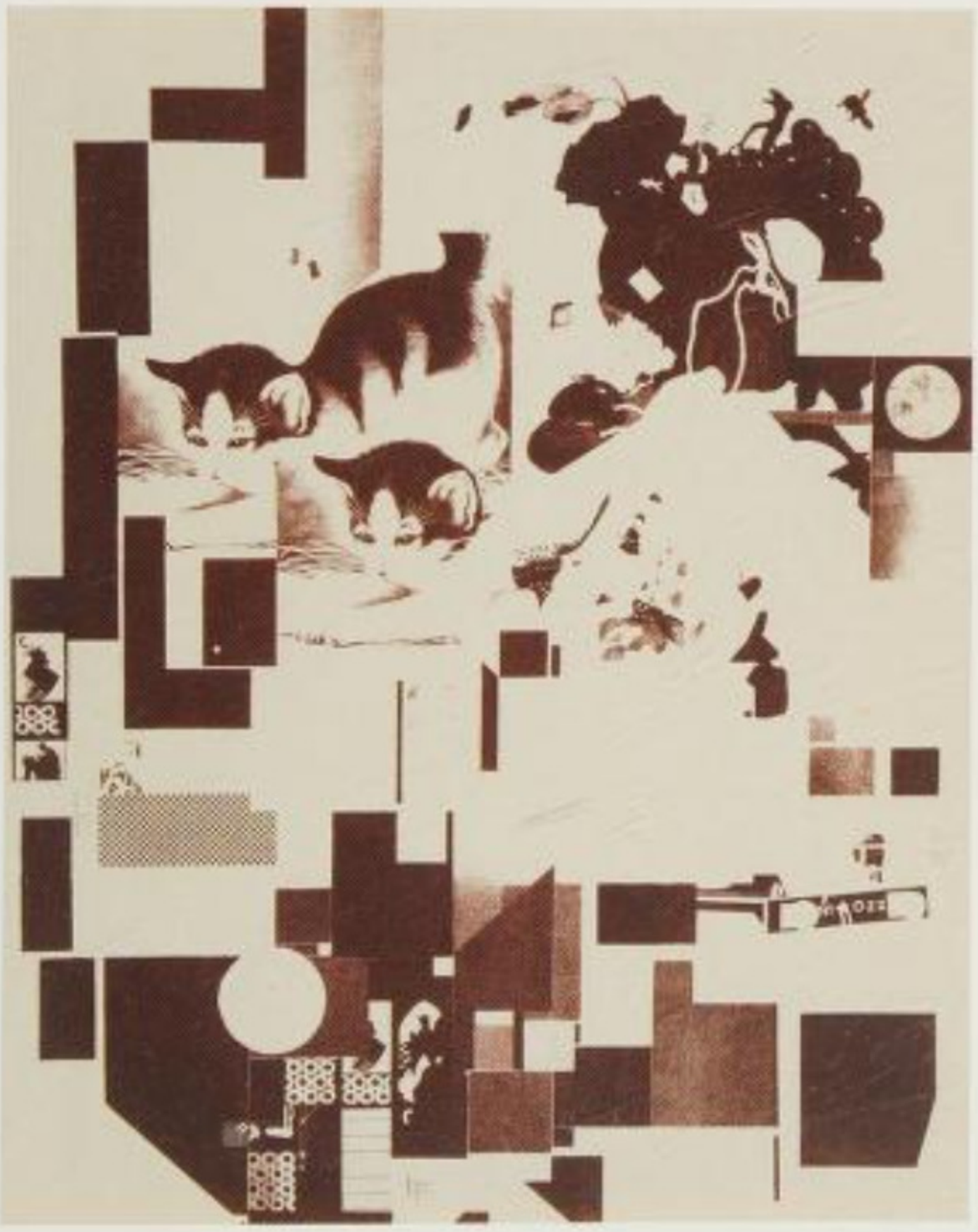
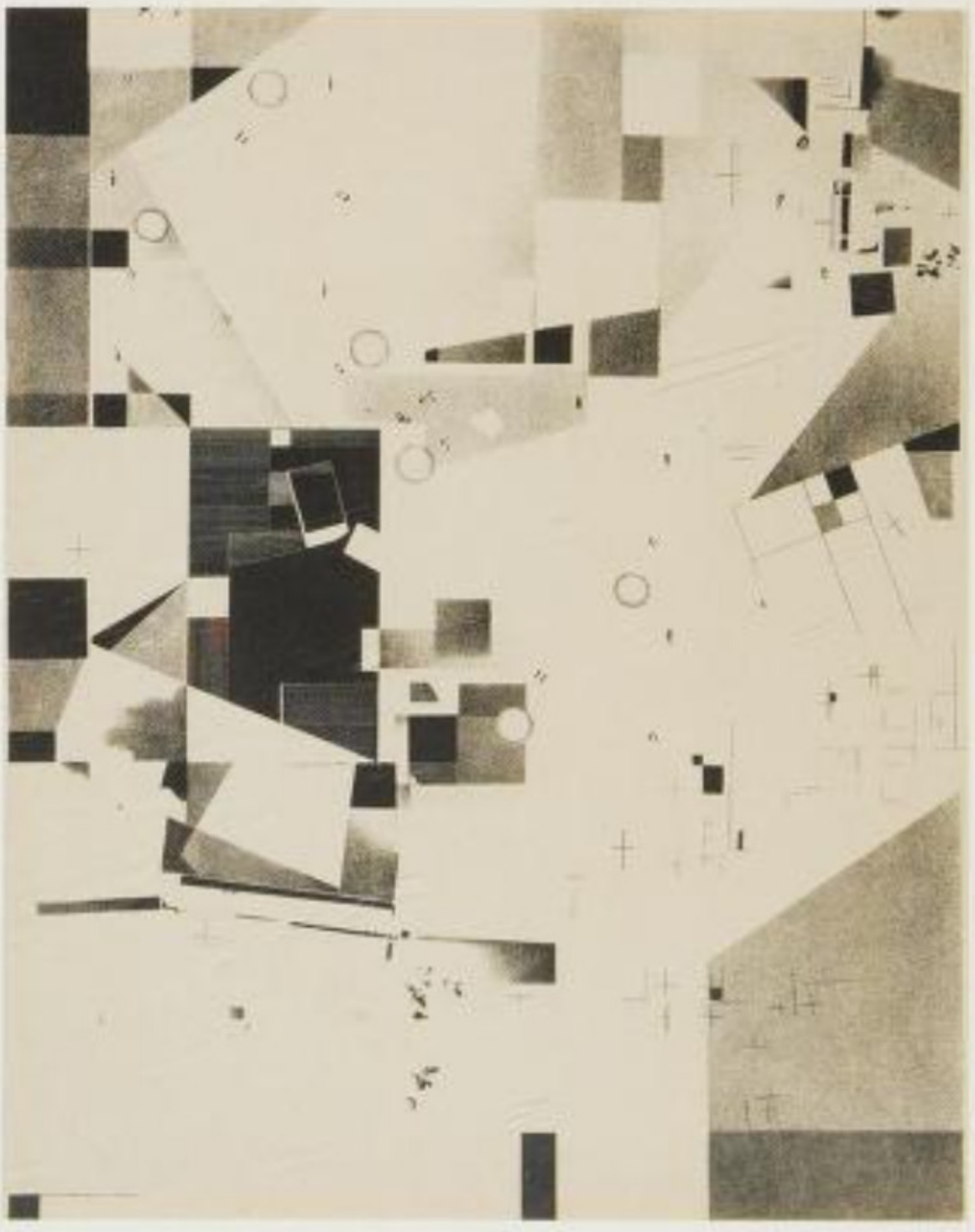




Schwarzes Notizbuch VI S. 241

Wilhelm Bode.

Bücher, wer hätte sie nicht?
Zeitungs-Ausschnitte von Reden
Gott der Herr macht den Mann,
erst den Hirn hat Gerne
(Goethe.)

324
400
225

Ordnung in allen Dingen.

Dieser Ordnung, französische Himmelstochter" singt Schiller in seiner Glocke. Er hat recht und fromme die Ordnung gar nicht genug loben können als eine Tugend Himmelstochter, denn die Ordnung ist es, auf der sich so manches andere im Leben aufbaut. Ist Ordnung auch in kleinen Dingen, die wirklich das größte Werk entehren. Wir sind dadurch nämlich Menschen geht es, denen es niemals gelingen will, trotz aller Mühewaltung eine bequemere Arbeit bis zu ihrer Vollendung durchzuführen, weil aus dem Grunde, weil es an Vollständigkeit an der nötigen Ordnung fehlte. Ordnung ist der Grundsatz irdischen Seins, irdischen Werdens, die Ordnung aber ist es auch, welche uns Gottes Allgegenwärtigkeit. Ein Blick in das große Walten der Natur lehrt uns tagtäglich diese überaus, in welch musterhafter Ordnung sich hier alles aufbaut, ein Blick in den Betrieb eines großen industriellen Unternehmens weist doch nur die Ordnung sich als sicherste Stütze es ist, die das unternehmerische Schaffen ermöglicht. Ordnung im Denken, Ordnung im Handeln, das heißt die Grundlagen allen Tuns für jeden Menschen sein. Als wichtigstes kann die Ordnung im Hause gelten werden und hier sich es namentlich der Frauen, die durch Ordnungsliebe vorbildlich wirken können. Das Gegenteil ist der Schmutz des Geistes. Nicht die Ordnung Raum im Hause, hält's auch im Herzen die auch. Mag es auch manchmal viel Mühe und Aufopferung kosten, Ordnung in allen Dingen zu halten, den gewachsenen Mühen gewandt begegnen können, der Erfolg macht sich aber doch bald bemerkbar und bietet reiche Entschädigung für die aufgewendete Mühe. Mag manchmal manchem Hausfrauen viel ein Verdruß sein, ein Ersatzmittel für die Ordnung, ein Verbrechen gegen Reinlichkeit für das Kleid. Ordnung spart Zeit und Zeit ist Geld. Traum heißt Ordnung, liebe sie, die Ordnung spart die meiste Mühe.

Zeitverschwendung.

Wage den Tag! Dieses köstliche Wort kann nicht oft genug wiederholt werden, muß als Leitmotiv der Lebensführung des Jugendlichen im Gedächtnis jeden angelegt bleiben. Nicht in der Tiefe kann man unbegrenzten, verlorenen Geld, verlorenes Glück, verlorener Gesundheit, aber ein verlorener Tag ist unersetzlich im Leben. Denn nur auf die Gegenwart uns bietet, können wir ausnützen, um gilt das so gepriesenen Besitzen unsere Weg zum Erfolg zu pflastern. Nicht was gestern ist, kann wir zurückholen, nicht was in der Zukunft liegt, können wir herbeizwingen, denn schon Mühe macht es, daß schon mittelmäßige Zeit zu Werke anzuspannen. „Dreifach ist der Schritt der Zeit: — zögernd kommt sie Zukunft hergegangen, — pfeilschnell ist das Jetzt entflogen, — ewig fix und starr die Vergangenheit," so läßt uns schon Schiller in seinen Sprüchen des Konfuzius. Auch nicht von dem morgigen Tag sollen wir uns leiten, wir sollen nicht auf Schätze warten, die uns dereinst vielleicht gebratene Tauben, sondern die Schätze ausnützen, die in unserem Bereich vorhanden liegen. Denn müssen wir immer in Bewegung bleiben und dem Willen zur Tätigkeit immer Folge leisten, denn die tote Maschine rostet ein, verschmutzt und verliert an Leistungsfähigkeit, wenn sie stillsteht. Nur nicht leeren Hoffnungen nachhängen, die jeder Wendung des Geschicks gerichtet machen kann. Versuche erst ein Können zu erreichen an materiellen wie an ideellen Gütern, und auf sicheren Fundamenten baue weiter, so wird du dich langsam aus der grauen Masse herausheben, wirst die Klugen bis lachen, die in allen Schwierigkeiten kapitulieren, und wirst erkennen, wie du immer besser kannst. Gelingt deine Lebensführung so gering ist, wenn deine Lebenskraft so voller Kraft verbraucht wird, ehe du auf den höchsten Höhen der Menschheit marschiert — mag viele besser, aber wenige vollendet sind — wirst du doch deinen Lebenskreis so ausgefüllt haben, so du vor jeder Stufe des Fortschritts befriedigt zurückblicken und Mut zu neuen Vollendungen fassen kannst.

„Rastlos vorwärts strebt du streben,
Nie ermüdet stille stehn,
Willst du zur Vollendung gehn."

Großstadt.. ....Mädels.

WALTER HEINRICH
Schlossbergstrasse 11
FREIBURG (BADEN)

Weimar.
404
Ordnung ist das halbe Leben.
Wird wissen Sie Leben ohne
MERZ?
MAPPE
1
KAIROS-VERLAG KÖLN

Heeresbericht aus dem Osten.

Die Oberste Heeresleitung meldet über die Lage im Osten: H. Q. A. Nord: Keine besonderen Ereignisse. Kowel wurde von uns geräumt. Polen und Ukrainer kämpfen jetzt um seinen Besitz. H. Q. A. Süd: Starke polnische Angriffe in der Gegend von Rawalitsch. Entgegenstöße der Polen wurden durch einen deutschen Gegenangriff zusammengeschlagen, der uns wieder in den Besitz sämtlicher beim Angriff verlorenen Ortschaften brachte. Im Nachbarabschnitt ist es uns gelungen, die Ortschaften Kolmar, Morgenitz südöstlich Schneidemühl zu besetzen. Dagegen fällig ein eigener Vorstoß zur Wiedergewinnung des Bahnhofs Exin fehl. Schließlich südwestlich Bromberg wurden von uns infolge des Polenabzuges geräumt.

Der Breslauer Offizierstreik beendigt.

Eigene Drahtung.

Breslau, 8. Februar.

Der Konflikt zwischen dem Breslauer Soldatenrat und den Offizieren, der zum Offiziersstreik führte, ist heute durch allseits befriedigende Einigungserklärungen beendigt worden.

Wetteraussichten für morgen:
Etwas geselliger, trocken und vorwiegend heiter bei schwachen westlichen Winden.

Unsere deutsche Jugend

soll in nationalem und freiheitlichem Sinne erzogen werden zu einem tüchtigen, tapferen Geschlecht. Das aber ist nur möglich, wenn nicht von unberufenen Händen die Zucht der Schule angetastet, der segenspendende Einfluß des Elternhauses gemindert wird. Selbstverständlich aber muß

freie Bahn

für die begabten Kinder aller Stände zu den Schätzen von Wissenschaft und Kunst, muß die unbedingte Lehrfreiheit gewährleistet, unser gesamtes Unterrichtswesen vervollkommnet werden.

sind die Erziehungsziele der Deutschen Volkspartei.

Beunruhigung im Osten.

Berlin, 28. Juni. Das Kriegsministerium macht folgendes bekannt: Der Beunruhigung in der Ostprovinzen hat sich infolge der Unterzeichnung des Friedensvertrags eine große Erregung bemächtigt, die sich auf die Befürchtung gründet, daß die Grenzschutztruppen jetzt schon zurückgezogen werden und die Landesteile, die abgetreten werden sollen, oder in denen es zu einer Abstimmung kommt, ohne militärischen Schutz blieben. Demgegenüber wird ausdrücklich betont, daß der militärische Schutz im Osten bis zum ordnungsmäßigen Uebergang in die durch den Friedensvertrag geschaffenen neuen Besitzverhältnisse bestehen bleibt.

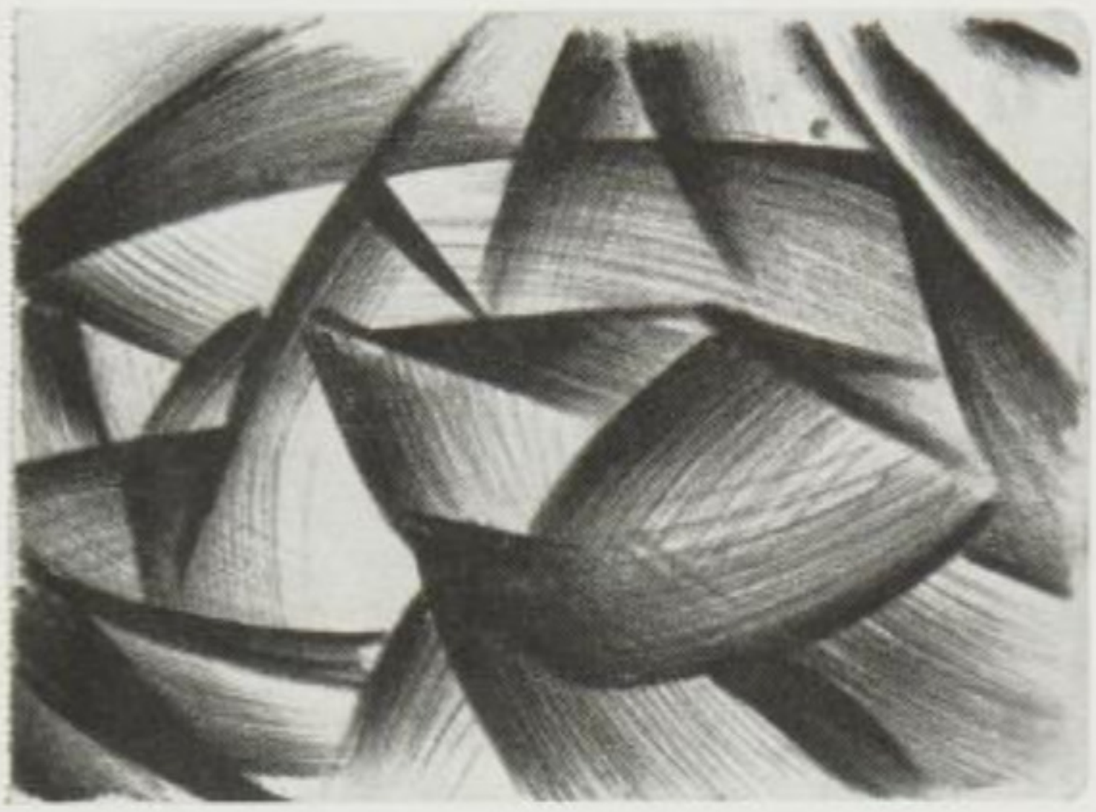
Die Unterzeichnung.

89 *Birch Tree near Burgwedel*, 1907

Hjertøya hut during the nineteen-thirties (fig. 77), and sundry note-books and address books in which he stuck photos and cards from friends. One of his scrapbooks, dubbed *Black Notebook VI* (fig. 88), contains intact press cuttings, i.e., they are meant to be read properly for their own sake rather than envisaged as subordinate to a visual composition. Schwitters avidly saved press notices of his own exhibitions, small illustrations, and articles about other artists. It is interesting to note that many of his cuttings are of a political cast, which supports the view that Schwitters was by no means indifferent to events on the wider stage of history, even if he rarely drew on such material in the artworks proper.

Supplementary Artistic Productions

Not everything that Schwitters touched exactly turned to Merz. While not advertising the fact, this avant-garde pioneer kept up, throughout his career, a vigorous output of paintings and drawings in an unexceptional figurative style, which one would hesitate to classify as a genuine contribution to the Merz canon. One of the earliest extant works in this conventional mode is *Birch Tree near Burgwedel* (1907, fig. 89), the simple portrayal of a solitary tree standing on uncertain soil before a vast moor. Here Schwitters manifests a penchant for bleak landscapes that will stay with him to the end of his life. A sketch pad dated 1917 records the young



90 *Z 57 Abstraction*, 1918

traveler's impressions of a tour of southern Germany: half the charcoal sketches are of landscapes, and include stark mountain scenery transposed in assertive strokes which reflect the Expressionist manner of the time.

Landscape painting might indeed be seen as Schwitters's hobby, a relaxing alternative to the more provocative productions of Merz. A set of rural vistas painted in 1924 near Göhren Beach, on the east coast of the island of Rügen, indicates that plein air painting was a favorite summer pastime. Scenes of Lake Garda and Genoa record a 1932 trip to Italy. During the thirties, Schwitters and Helma took regular vacations in Norway, where sketches of sites such as the islet of Hjertøya in Molde Fjord and the frozen Lake Djupvand reflect a tradition of the Sublime dating back to German Romanticism. It is as if Schwitters were hankering to be part of a figurative tradition, just as he was seeking to escape from it.

Of the artist's undoubted competence as a portrait painter, little needs to be said other than that the basic skills acquired in his early years remained intact throughout his life. Portraits of acquaintances in Germany, and later of fellow internees at the Douglas camp, or again of neighbors in Ambleside, were an important source of income, indeed an indispensable lifeline in exile (fig. 23). Among other items in the Schwitters repertoire are occasional sketches and watercolors of a humorous kind, as well as drawings and woodcuts exploring nonrepresentational shapes, such as *Z 57 Abstraction* (fig. 90) or *Abstraction 148* (fig. 91).

Schwitters's son Ernst would became a professional photographer, and Schwitters himself tried his hand at the camera, producing holiday snapshots as well as serious landscape studies, including some interesting textural shots of flowing water. One photo shows the artist bending over a handheld camera in a hotel room, photographing himself in a mirror. During the twenties, Schwitters experimented briefly with the photogram technique, laying household objects upon light-sensitive paper (fig 92); contemporaries such as Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy would develop this procedure to greater effect.

91 *Abstraction 148*, 1918

92 Photogram with White Heart / Photogram 1, 1928–31

93 *Djupvand med sne (Lake Djupvand with Snow)*, 1938

94 *Isbræ under sne (Glacier under Snow), 1937*

Schwitters in Exile: Norway

It would be very hard to correlate each of Schwitters's collages with the contemporary political situation, yet one senses an urgency and a growing anxiety in the period leading up to his departure in January 1937 into what proved to be permanent exile. Life in Norway could not have seemed too dark at first, for Schwitters knew the country from holiday visits over the previous decade, and, having once settled at Lysaker on the outskirts of Oslo, he began to create a fresh *Merzbau*, the *Haus am Bakken*, a building boasting a wide view over the Oslo Fjord. While remaining loyal to the principles of Merz, Schwitters nevertheless mentioned the concept less and less, and indeed turned increasingly to landscape painting, inspired by the rugged mountains above Molde Fjord and the island of Hjertøya, which he and Helma had discovered in 1932. Schwitters spent the next three summers there, and undertook various tours in the region, traveling by train, bus, and on foot to destinations such as Åndalsnes and Trollstigen in the dramatic Romsdal region.

Though largely ignored by art history until recently, the Norwegian landscape paintings are undoubtedly a salient component of Schwitters's œuvre. By now, he had been producing pictures of the natural world for two decades, and his past production could be said to reflect an efficient, if sometimes stereotyped, approach. Whereas the collagemaker was self-taught, the landscape artist had once followed a course in landscape painting. Schwitters was particularly attracted to mountains and wide stretches of water, and generally to the typical features of the western coast of southern Norway. But now a fresh factor seems to arise. No longer does he just copy the brute shapes of a world marked by the impact of long-distant geological forces. His works take on documentary significance in that they bear titles tying them to specific sites, yet their treatment is emotional and emotive rather than factual and detached. Conforming in this regard to the general ethos of Expressionism, and in tune with the landscape vision of such artists as Edvard Munch and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Schwitters introduces a supple, sometimes splashy brushstroke into his practice, guiding lush slews of pigment across the canvas with impulsive and urgent gestures. A special aura appertains to the artist's fixation upon extreme geological formations or extreme natural events. Waterfalls, stormy shores, glaciers, snowfields, sheer cliffs, and summits, all these are motifs in a visual lexicon that speaks to an ideal of sublimity verging upon the inhuman. More precisely, it is the confrontation with the underlying savagery of Norway that haunts these paintings, as it does likewise in the stark monochrome photography that Ernst Schwitters was producing at the time.

Schwitters's exile years in Norway (1937–40) saw an accumulation of many such views. We might want to say that these outdoor scenes are completely at odds with the studio-based rigors of Constructivism; yet the best of these paintings, such as *Lake Djupvand with Snow* (1938, fig. 93) or *Glacier under Snow* (1938, fig. 94), can be seen to veer toward abstraction in that they reconcile the specifics of the painted site with a parallel extreme generalization of location, by extrapolating from the site's basic natural shapes. Thus *Lake Djupvand with Snow*, where black mountains slope up from snow-laden ice, becomes an exercise in the disposition of zones of black within an ambient whiteness. Similarly *Glacier under Snow* is an aesthetic formalization in monochrome, a landscape abstracted and transfigured both by the coating of snow and the artist's physically unrestrained and nonspecific brushstrokes. The oil painting *Lysaker* (ca. 1939, fig. 95) remains perfectly referential in that it evokes the weightiness of clustered snow, frozen to the branches of trees, yet begins to demonstrate a vigorous painterliness that bears comparison with the work of the Abstract Expressionists of New York. *Hjertøya Cross*, 1939, fig. 96) is a simple yet highly effective transcription of a view reduced to a few essential streaks, splashed across a harrowing whiteness. In the canvas *Untitled (Snow-Covered Boat Landing)* (1937–39, fig. 19), the artist shoves a great wedge of black paint into the middle of what is essentially a prospect of undeviating whiteness. This opaque slab is almost painful to contemplate until one construes it as the underside of a jetty jutting into the lake. It is as though Schwitters were struck by the monstrousness of the alternative world into which fishermen and boats might venture, but can find no way of alluding to humanity except through this clumsy blot, a scar that only heightens the pristine purity of nature's reign.

Only a step or so away from these landscapes are the abstract paintings done on wood which Schwitters seems to have produced

95 *Lysaker*, around 1939

96 *Hjertøya Cross*, 1939

in a rather self-conscious outburst during the years 1938 and 1939. These are not particularly attractive works, and they appear to hark back to antecedents earlier than Constructivism, incorporating as they do arabesque swirls and multiple quasi-Pointillist dabs that are more reminiscent of Futurist canvases by Umberto Boccioni or Carlo Carrà. One of these abstractions is *Mz. Oslo Fjord* (1937, fig. 97). Here Schwitters seems to be doing three things at once. Manifestly a nonfigurative work, the painting is paradoxically said to represent an actual place, while equally being associated with Merz, that process of "de-formulating" or erasing all evidence of origin. A casual glance at the image might make an identification of choppy waters, though other shapes, suggestive of three-dimensional forms, are less easily equated with the features of a real fjord. One is bound to conclude that the image is an exercise in abstract curves, enhanced by a few dabs of crimson, and that it asks to be

98 *Rubbish Picture.*, 1938

97 *Mz. Oslo Fjord*, 1937

considered as a contribution to nonobjective abstract art rather than be seen as some sort of biomorphic evocation with trails of referentiality. Another apparently abstract work is *Rubbish Picture* (1938, fig. 98), which belies its dismissive title by being carefully wrought, with suave variations of hue and zones of contrasted texture produced by carefully varied dabs of the brush. It is arguably not fully abstract, in that its shapes include a white disc suggestive of a full moon, a few areas of stippling that could indicate a forest, and a slim, blue-gray segment that suggests a stylized aerial view of the narrow island of Hjertøya.

A rough count of the extant paintings from the years 1937–39 indicates that there exist over a hundred works that can be readily categorized as landscapes, whereas only two dozen or so are abstractions, whether relief paintings or flat paintings. Of course, this comparison might mislead us as to the artist's aesthetic priorities, for many of his landscapes were conceived as moneyspinners. One must therefore reckon on some element of acquiescence

99 *Untitled (March)*, 1937

to popular taste, whereas the abstract works were scarcely ever sold and are in this sense likely to be more closely aligned to the artist's cherished ideals. Even so, all creative acts are expressive, and each work handled by Schwitters seems to mark a specific point on the wider graph of his inventions, marking out a general curve of production that charts the fluctuations of an artistic sensibility across different years and different circumstances.

While Schwitters was adapting to his new existence in a foreign land and to the uncomfortable fact of being cut off from his wife and his accustomed home life, collagemaking remained, as ever, a daily routine. German sources of Merz material rarely lay at hand, and the Norwegian collages reflect the man's curiosity and occasional bafflement as he confronts an unfamiliar linguistic environment and visual culture. Schwitters was always intrigued by traces of the exotic within the everyday, and was particularly receptive to the strangeness of litter from other cultures and in other languages. Though it appears he never got far as a speaker of Norwegian, he had a passion for printed matter in the foreign tongue, and particularly enjoyed mixing linguistic fragments, as we saw him doing in the 1923 collage *Mz 601* (fig. 51), with its French and Dutch components. Now based in Lysaker, he produced the collage *Untitled (March)* (1937, fig. 99). The work incorporates two Norwegian items—a ticket to the famous National Theatre in Oslo and a label for a delicacy called *marsipanbrød* (marzipan bread). Whereupon the artist adds a snippet in German: the isolated word *März* (March), at once a fortuitous echo of *marsipan* and a coded reference to Merz, the homonym of *März*. It's as though Schwitters—who also inserts himself at top left in the form of the pencilled half-signature *Sch*—were determined to assert the continuity of his Merz practice, despite his enforced passage into an alien environment. The fact that *März* is printed in old-fashioned *Fraktur* (Gothic script) might also be seen as an index of yearning, a wistful reminder of a Germanic culture now out of reach. The same whiff of homesickness may be discerned in the artist's frequent use of scraps torn from envelopes and packets mailed from Germany. Henceforth, the reverent preservation of postmarks from Hanover, or indeed from any other place outside Norway, should be interpreted as a sign of a displaced person's susceptibility to news from elsewhere.

Dates are also important factors in our reading of the exile work. Schwitters was a habitual noticer of dates, anniversaries, and coincidences. Thus the American postmark "FLUSHING NY / APR. 9 1941" in *Untitled (TERNATIONA)* (1942, fig. 100), probably taken from an envelope sent by his good friend Kate Steinitz, undoubtedly signals the refugee's delight at finding that her letter has got through to him from across the Atlantic. A frequent motif in the early Norwegian collages is the date page torn from a calendar, as in *Dot on the i* (1939, fig. 102), which carries two consecutive dates: Wednesday 15 November and Thursday 16 November—the second date being that of Ernst Schwitters's birthday. (Ernst turned 21 in 1939.) These dates indicate a concern with the passage of time and the recurrence of certain events or memories of events. Here is further evidence of an autobiographical strand in Schwitters's art, which is nowhere more bound up in private circumstance than here.

100 *Untitled (TERNATIONA)*, 1942

101 *Untitled (Merz Picture Alf)*, 1939

102 *Dot on the i*, 1939

Another novelty can be discerned in the Norway assemblages, namely the introduction of *naturalia* as distinct from the *artificialia* of urban life. In fact, a number of earlier works, made during summer holidays in the thirties, had included beach detritus such as shells, seaweed, sand, and driftwood; but now there emerge works which draw on materials culled from inland locations, including roots, twigs, moss, and feathers. The assemblage *Untitled (Merz Picture Alf)* (1939, fig. 101) manages to subsume the following components: a mussel shell, a feather, a fragment of coral, a leaf, and a flower. These are counterbalanced by only a few manmade components: a scrap of print bearing the word *Alf*, a small metal ring, a few scuffs of oil paint, and the planed wood frame and wood support. One senses here a conscious effort to accentuate nonhuman resources, as though art were truly attuned to nature and open to the spontaneous rhythms and formations of organic growth. This might seem like proof of Schwitters's underlying affinity with the Romanticism of a Novalis or an Eichendorff. Of course, idiosyncrasy still plays an irreducible part in the compositional choices, so that the assemblage may not be a celebration of the great Norwegian outdoors so much as a celebration of the Merz principle of the unexpected, the incongruous, the non-artlike. And to the extent that at least some natural materials are subject to fairly swift decay, there is a sense in which gatherings of this kind are immediately tainted by intimations of melancholy and loss. For instance, in the collage *Untitled (Lysaker)* of 1937 (fig. 103), the presence of real snowdrops alongside the printed word *Lysaker* and a small paper version of the Norwegian flag seems to indicate an emotional attachment to a somewhat precarious site of exile. Seven decades on, the pressed flowers have completely faded and are no longer intact. Some may wish to read further sentiment into this, for it is known that Schwitters made several applications for Norwegian citizenship around this time, but failed to achieve his aim.

103 *Untitled (Lysaker)*, 1937

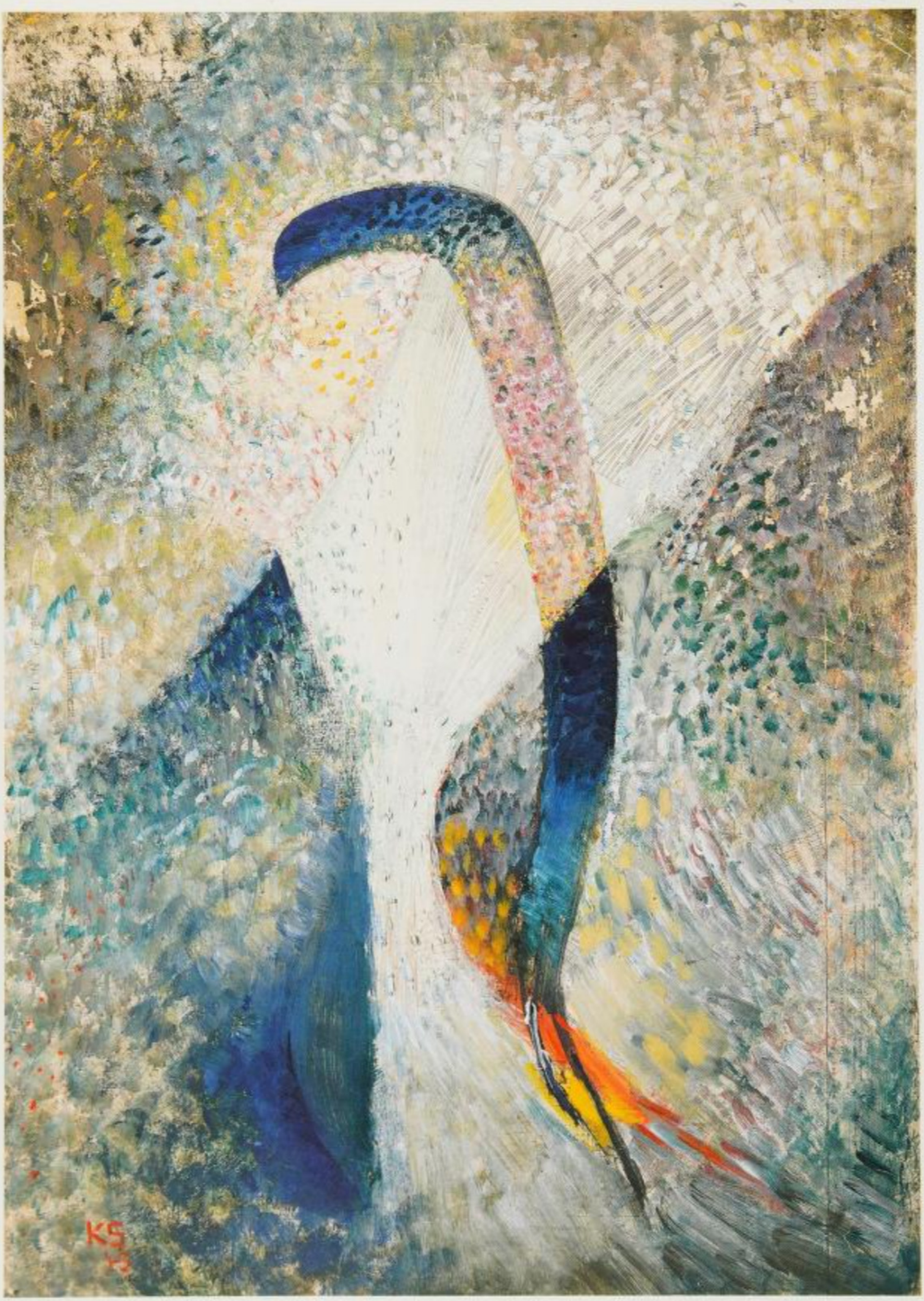
Schwitters in Exile: England

The assemblage *Untitled (Very Dark Picture)* (1940, fig. 20) dates from the onset of war in Europe and is appropriately somber, with a dangling square of painted metal set like a fragment of shrapnel against a black background. History now forced Schwitters out of his creative routine, and few works survive from the period beginning with his flight from Norway in April 1940 to his discharge from Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man in November 1941. Once he was released and could find his feet in London, Schwitters began to develop a passion for the contemporary culture of the English metropolis, and immersed himself in its language, both oral and written, evincing far more linguistic resolve than he had done in Norway. These months see Schwitters making extensive use of used tickets from the London Transport buses. They were a readily accessible and congenial source of material for him, for they contain numerals and the names of strange landmarks, and are redolent of travel, all elements guaranteed to appeal to the man's idiosyncratic taste. Enemy bombardments of the city meant that streetcar travel had become problematic, while buses were more likely to get through the damaged streets. Schwitters seems to have developed a particular fondness for this mode of transport. Streetcars would run again in London after the war ended, as would trains and the Underground, but—like some fastidious collector loyal to a single genre—Schwitters stuck fetishistically to the used bus ticket with its clipped little holes, just as he did to the candy ad and the chocolate wrapper. Two halves of the same fourpenny London bus ticket, delivered on route 7, are enshrined in the collage *like an old master* (1942, fig. 104). Here the reproduction of an Old-Master painting is half-veiled by a piece of thin fabric, and its juxtaposition to the bus ticket is a case of Schwitters mischievously mixing the highbrow with the lowbrow. On the back of this collage, he has copied out his address: 3 St. Stephens Crescent, London. This could be merely fortuitous, yet it smacks of loneliness, like a message in a bottle. (It was at about this time that he first met Edith Thomas.)

A few out-and-out abstractions from the war years show that Schwitters had not abandoned his commitment to the precept of nonobjectivity. Despite its title, a work such as *Picture with Railway Station Plan* (1943, fig. 105) points away from the real world. Granted, the referential title encourages the viewer to tease out some trace of visual representation, and thus to notice the diagram of railway tracks and sidings which has served as a base for the oil paint. However, the brushstrokes have all but deleted this diagram, and the main interest of the image lies in the overlay of curved zones of pigment. Granted, the passages of white could suggest a foaming waterfall, and the central sickle-like shape may resemble a bird, but the entire picture is saturated with repetitive daubs in the artist's loose pointillist manner, and this tells us that the true point or subject of the work lies in its abstractness.

During 1946 there was a startling acceleration in the making of paper collages, and during the calendar year 1947, the last full year of his life, Schwitters amassed his highest tally of all, completing no less than 213 collages, over and above the considerable work produced in other formats, including the *Merz Barn*. Psychologically,

104 *like an old master*, 1942

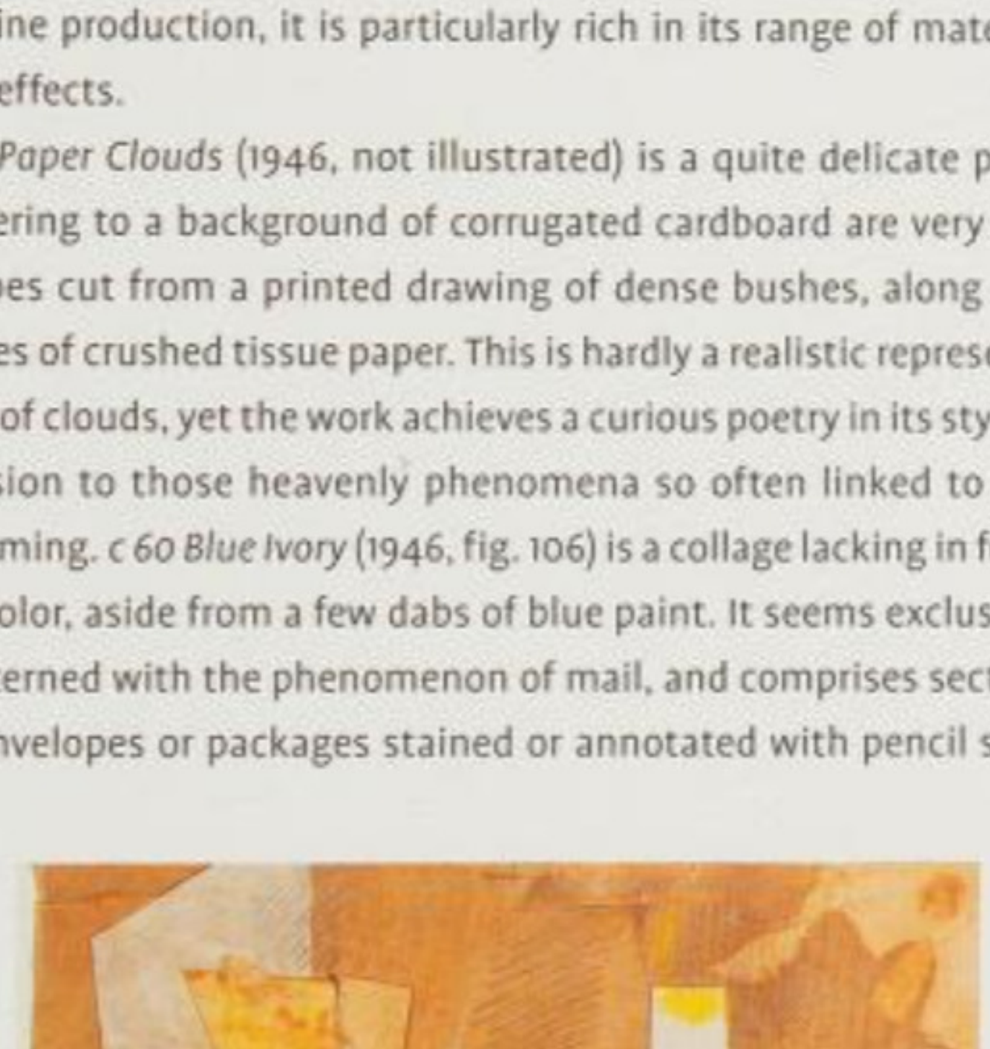


105 *Untitled (Picture with Railway Station Plan)*, 1943

this creative outburst may be explicable as an expression of relief at having survived the war; or again as a function of an anxiety about creative potency at a time of deteriorating health. Artistically, the torrent of collages represents a summation and a celebration of Schwitters's most distinctive medium. Far from being a matter of routine production, it is particularly rich in its range of materials and effects.

Paper Clouds (1946, not illustrated) is a quite delicate piece. Adhering to a background of corrugated cardboard are very dark shapes cut from a printed drawing of dense bushes, along with pieces of crushed tissue paper. This is hardly a realistic representation of clouds, yet the work achieves a curious poetry in its stylized allusion to those heavenly phenomena so often linked to daydreaming. *c 60 Blue Ivory* (1946, fig. 106) is a collage lacking in forceful color, aside from a few dabs of blue paint. It seems exclusively concerned with the phenomenon of mail, and comprises sections of envelopes or packages stained or annotated with pencil scribbles. It also bears a scrap from an advert for Perrier water. Its most interesting feature is the inclusion of two postmarks from very different sources: one from Los Angeles and the other, on part of an envelope bearing Schwitters's new address in Ambleside, in the county of Westmorland. A few years before, one of his London addresses had been 39 Westmoreland Road SW13, so this looks like another case of private association, suggestive of a reverie about the convergence of very distant places.

107 *Untitled (With Two Yellow Parachutes)*, 1945



106 *c 60 Blue Ivory*, 1946

Untitled (With Two Yellow Parachutes) (1945, fig. 107) shows Schwitters in half-playful, half-earnest mood, as he sets a scrap of a colored magazine photo—askew, as if that were itself a joke—upon an unassuming background of reinforced paper comprising uneven threading. A few other scraps, torn, scuffed, or scissored, are tipped in as afterthoughts. There is a distinct air of an artist doing what he knows he can still do with impunity, which is to tease his viewer with allusions to realistic representation while in fact working abstractly.

108 *Untitled (ABLE)*, 1947

Geometric abstraction has left its mark on a number of collages from 1947 that experiment with accentuating the horizontal or the vertical. *Untitled (ABLE)* (1947, fig. 108) typifies this series, with upright strips of material forming a kind of barred window behind which we half-register the presence of the arm of a man in uniform. (Close inspection reveals that the arm is in fact one of the *added-on* strips, so that there is a whimsical confusion here as to which strip represents a window-bar close to us, and which the background proper.) A small strip of newsprint, taken from the "For Sale" column of a newspaper, adopts a horizontal position, as if to contest the vertical emphasis. Such compositional anomalies hint at a stance of ironic dissent, warning us that the artist reserves the right to contest even his own emphasis on formal rigor.

The collage entitled *Colorful Newspaper Shreds* (1947, fig. 110) comes across as a demonstration of compositional fecklessness, with paper fragments torn carelessly from a newspaper and stuck to a rectangular card. One fragment on smoother paper looks to have been taken from an exhibition review in an art journal. It contains the phrase "the work of art and the background of realities from which it is drawn," which can be read as an invitation to the viewer to think about the biographical or social context of such an image. The newsprint we see is generally banal, but the fact that the scraps are all tinged with red—wine stains or blood?—injects anxiety into the message, inviting us to imagine a context of penury or impending violence. As so often, there is a frustrating obscurity about the wording, yet a mood of brooding trepidation lingers.

A very different proposition—half-textual, half-textural—is offered in the collage *red spot. (2)* (1947, fig. 109), in which paper scraps have been stuck down and then sprinkled with sand. This would be a very nondescript image were it not for the title, which alerts us to the lone spot of pale red in the upper left of the piece. One may be inclined to react not at all to this minimal expression; it scarcely registers as a work of art, for its textural and compositional virtues are negligible. Yet, once noted, it may linger as a general index of Schwitters's fondness for all things overlooked. A red spot, after all, might normally alert us to something of importance; yet, if one inspects it, the spot proves to be no more than a smudge, scarcely a mark fraught with meaning. Nevertheless, despite the wretchednesss, the sheer futility of the image, one may still register an atmosphere or mood. To the extent that Schwitters seems not to be

109 *red spot. (2)*, 1947

110 *Colorful Newspaper Shreds*, 1947

111 *Untitled (Composition with Tube and Horseshoe)*, 1943–45

112 *Wantees hair*, 1947

113 *c 77 wind swept*, 1946

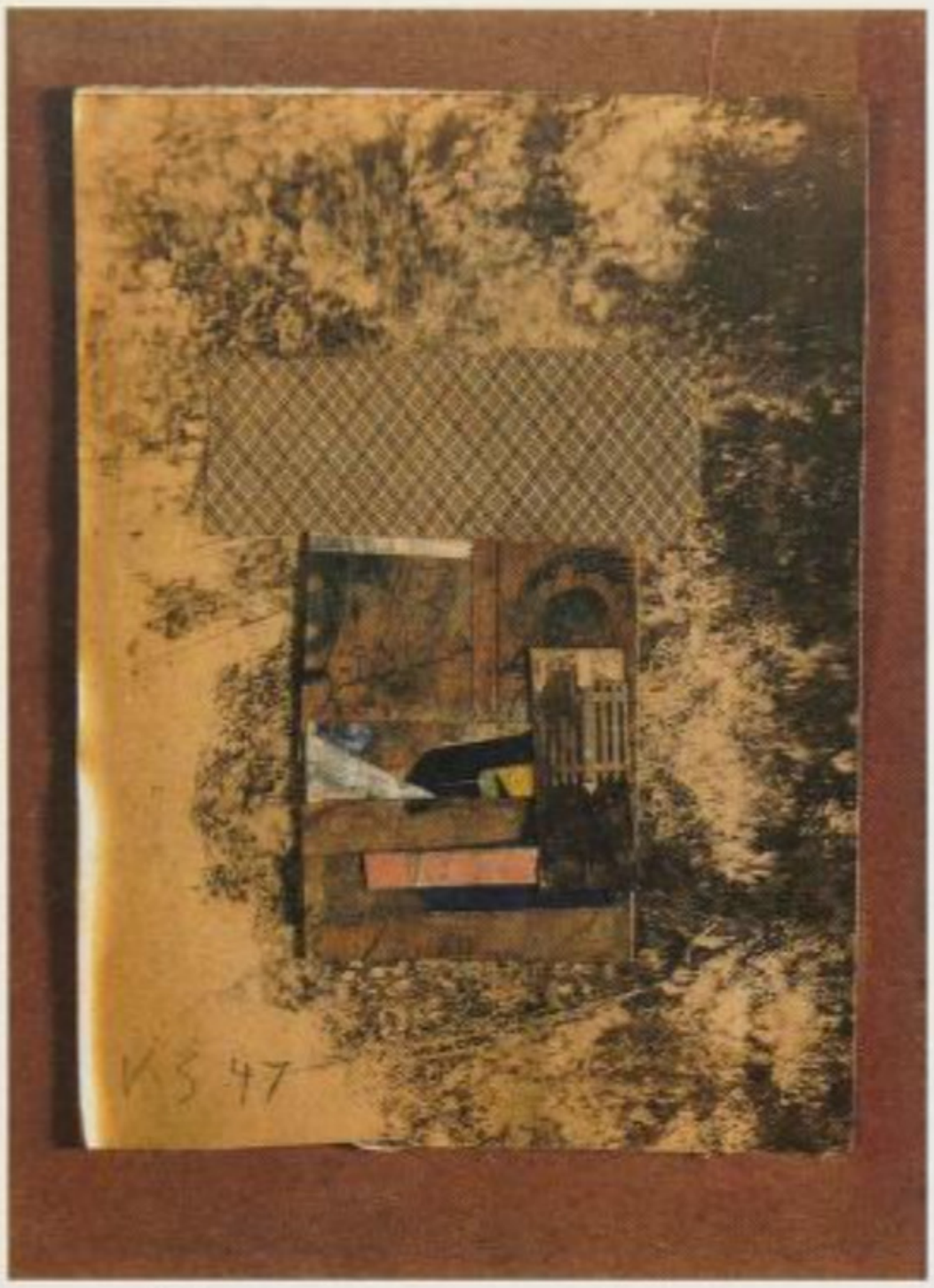
joking, this may be a lesson about the act of collagemaking, an almost desperate demonstration of the lowest level of expressivity that an artist dare achieve. The sheer load of emotion that we infer from our knowledge of Schwitters's predicament as a refugee in a strange land may persuade us to see here a gesture of defiance. There may be nothing much to say, and no strength to say it forcefully, yet this is an act of expression, made meaningful by virtue of its reduction to scarcely more than a hoarse whisper.

Something more violent and dramatic seems to inhere in the manner of the assemblage called *Composition with Tube and Horseshoe* (1943–45, fig. 111), largely a gathering of metal scraps which, true to his early motto, Schwitters has fixed to a rough wooden board with hammer and tin tacks. It is another example of the conscious implementation of the most pitiful materials; and although there are a few well-tried devices still in play, such as the distribution of circular objects around a wooden lid, and a disc set off-center within the rusty horseshoe—invitations to perceive an assured nexus to the design—the piece speaks bluntly of a tragic state of dissolution and decay. Worm-eaten or dishevelled paper scraps adhere to the board, but *only just*. They have the look of things *windswept*—this is in fact the poetic title of one 1946 collage (fig. 113)—and they point up, in a desperately impotent way, the mood of catastrophe. Here is beauty or something like—a catastrophic beauty, articulated through impoverished scraps that strain to scream aloud.

In total contrast, the collage EN MORN (1947, fig. 142) draws on gaudy magazine ads and product wrappers to evoke what amounts to a dream of plenty, an imaginary gratification that is manifestly at odds with the actual context of postwar rationing.

114 *Young Earnest*, 1944–47

115 *Untitled (G. STRINDBERG)*, 1946–47



116 *Untitled (Merz Drawing in Merz Drawing)*. 1947

Schwitters always had a sweet tooth, and, for want of the real thing, has indulged himself with the wrapper from a bar of peppermint chocolate and the label from a can of *Golden Morn* peaches, juxtaposing them with the face of a pretty girl torn from a magazine. The legend "These are the things we are fighting for" gives an ironic twist to a wartime slogan.

An obvious example of Schwitters revealing his emotions is *Wantees hair* (1947, fig. 112), for there can be no mistaking the ardor with which the artist honors his beloved Edith Thomas, extracting a kind of material quotation from her person. For, amid the usual slew of paper fragments, this collage houses two or three curls of a woman's hair, tucked away in the fashion of those trophies that the artist is said to have stolen from his friends and concealed inside the niches of the early *Merzbau*. We may note that even here there is a slight equivocation or hesitancy of expression, given that Wantee's curls are partly mixed in with curls of a different texture, hue, and provenance. A scribbled address and the rendezvous time of noon on a Friday supply a partial narrative, enough to stimulate our curiosity about this otherwise discreet piece.

The work entitled *Young Earnest* (1944–47, fig. 114) has been classified as a collage or *Merzzeichnung*, but is in fact a three-dimensional *Merzbild* or assemblage. It is close to being a readymade in that it comprises a single object, part of the cover of a novel by Gilbert Cannan entitled *Young Earnest*. (The novel itself dates from 1915, and its author was by this time confined in a mental institution, where he died in 1955.) A few paper scraps adorn the cover, as if Schwitters were claiming full authorship thereby. The book has a flagrantly frayed edge to its broken spine. The artist's title simply echoes the words in the picture, in accordance with established practice, but this time there is an obvious secondary reference, namely to his son Ernst. For Schwitters to implement a chance formula suggesting that his adult son is still "Young Ernst" could indicate a reflex of paternal affection. On the other hand, the book's battered state might point to a different response, along the lines "Alas, Ernst is now in his mid-twenties and is already showing signs of ageing." Undoubtedly such a thought points further, for Schwitters himself was nearing sixty at this time and poor health was starting to undermine his zestfulness.

By the summer of 1945, Schwitters had moved north with Edith Thomas to the small town of Ambleside, where the couple had holidayed three years before. It seems probable that the decision to leave war-battered London in favor of the wild spaces of the Lake District had much to do with Schwitters's affinity with untouched and rugged scenery. Moreover, studies of a barn beside Lake Djupvand made in 1930 and 1931 seem to prefigure the idea of the *Merz Barn* on which he worked at Elterwater in his last months.

One may smile at the little shifts in the complexion of the collages he now undertakes. *Untitled (G STRINDBERG)* (ca. 1946–47, fig. 115) bears witness to the change of location by exploiting a new type of bus ticket, marked for the Ribble Bus Company, whose services covered the Lake District and its lonely villages. Part of a cigarette packet bearing the trade name *Senior Service* sustains the context of Englishness, but Schwitters still wants to hark back to his prewar experiences, digging out some Norwegian newsprint and an Oslo postmark from his supply of scraps, as well as the name G. Strindberg (probably a commercial name, although Schwitters did once share a house in London with a Norwegian photographer called Gert Strindberg).

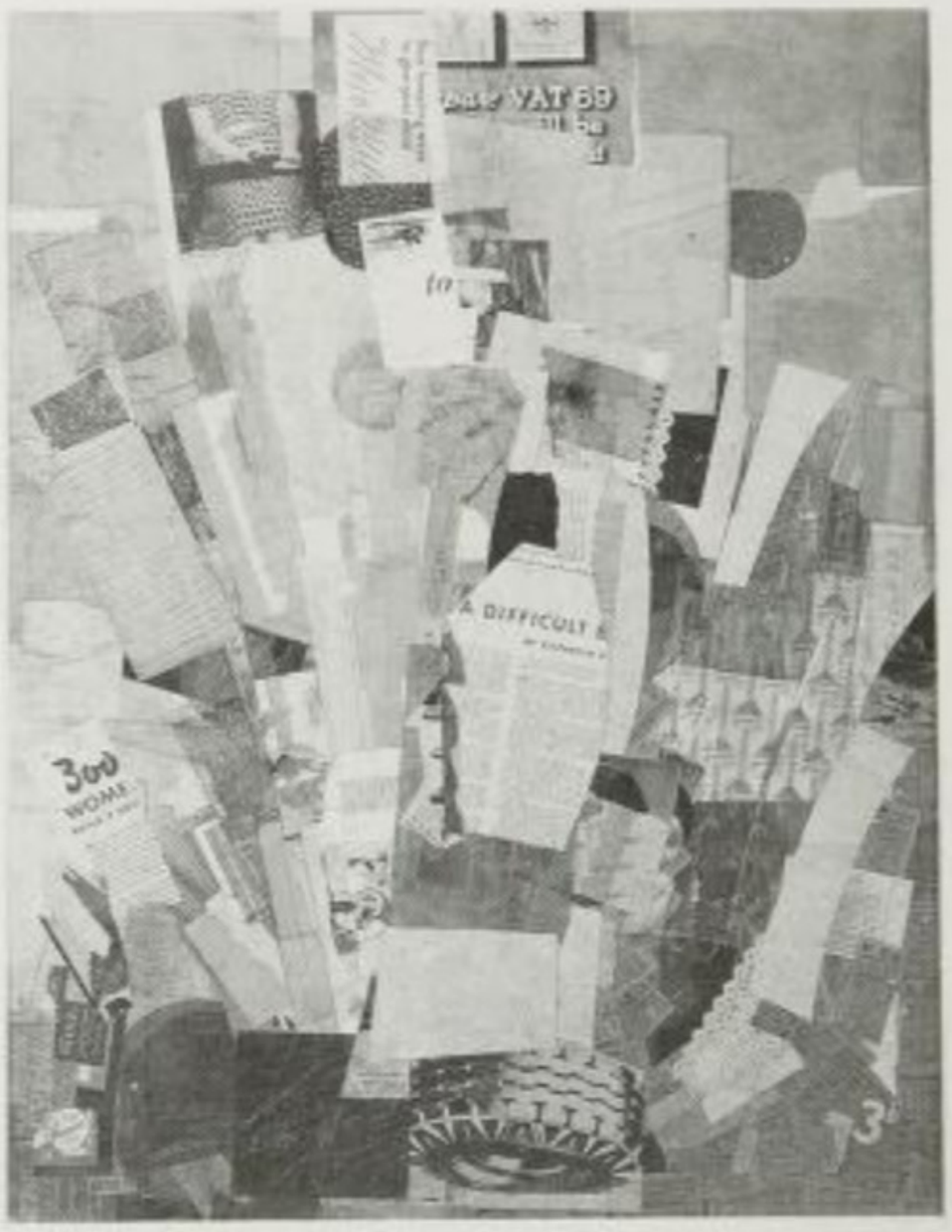
The work dubbed *Untitled (Merz Drawing in Merz Drawing)* (1947, fig. 116) is a slightly whimsical experiment in doubling in that a small Merz collage (perhaps deserving of the label "Aphorism") has been pasted onto a larger surface. There is already a

117 Kurt Schwitters at the easel in Norway, 1936–37

fragment of a photo within the small collage, while the larger surface against which it nestles is in fact also a photograph, this time of some thick bushes. The photo may well have been taken by Schwitters himself.[13] This picture is not strictly offered as something to view, given that it is set sideways and half-occluded by the supplementary material. An oblong section snipped from an airmail envelope is added to this, its patterned inner side exposed. The small collage slightly infringes the border of this patterned piece, as if to contest its late arrival, while the background photo has curled a little down its left side. The impression is one of haste: here is a restless grouping whose pieces are still jostling for position. Biographical knowledge might tempt the viewer to suppose that this formal precariousness symbolizes the position of a mature artist who feels overlooked and needs to agitate for international recognition. On the other hand, one could infer quite a serene, even ironic message, one which courageously articulates a universal truth about life and about artmaking: nothing is forever, and the mature attitude is to accept the precariousness not just of an individual life, but of existence at large. The vulnerability of the collage, its wounded beauty, are caught up within the prospect of the provisionality of all values, be they personal or shared, material or aesthetic. Such a flimsy Merz drawing would have absolutely no value were it not that it has been carefully put together by a wise and sentient creator.

Understanding Schwitters's Creative Project

Until the very end of his life, Schwitters remained loyal to his early decision to invest in handmade collage-works and three-dimensional constructions based on materials which many contemporaries found highly inappropriate, if not downright repellent. Yet it seems important to our understanding of Merz as a strategy for artmaking that we recognize its coexistence with such apparently incompatible modes as traditional landscape and portrait painting. A superficial explanation might be that a fierce commitment to the individualistic (and often enigmatic) aesthetic of Merz represented a stance that was stressful and self-conscious, whereas to exchange the studio for the open air in order to portray the local view was simply a way of relaxing, or of earning a little income. But there is surely a deeper significance to Schwitters's anomalous switches of genre and format.



118 *Untitled (DIFFICULT)*, 1942–45

119 *Z 71 The Lonely One. (2)*, 1918

This is an artist who was always supremely conscious of his vocation. A maker of distinctive works, he sought to foreground his individualism with the term Merz, his *cri de guerre* in the battle zones of avant-garde skirmishing, and his personal trademark in the commercial context. To appreciate the driving force behind his extensive œuvre, we need to see diversity and anomaly as essential "signatures" and as entirely positive values. One way to visualize Schwitters's progression in both artistic and spiritual terms is to think of him as a one-man force engaged in a campaign to establish the practice of art as something ennobling and inspiring. True, Schwitters's definitions of his creative project do not always fit his actual practice, and he rarely seems to have felt the need to defend or explain his nonmodernistic penchant for painting in the open air (fig. 117). If his creative activities possessed a general consistency, they certainly seem to have drifted in and out of definition, like figures in fog. Yet they always exhibited the same attitude of unfaltering energy and robust commitment. Perseverance makes the man; and the creative urge never lacked a sense of its own justification. The drive to a stylized beauty in the abstract works, it may be argued, runs parallel to the drive to a disturbing new beauty in the collages. One may be tempted to dismiss these last because of the impression they give of scattiness, and yet their underlying coherence emerges once one realizes that proliferation and flamboyant collision are ways to release outbursts of energy and illumination. In this regard, the capturing of the sublimity of a landscape may not be such a different thing from the capturing of worthless fragments and their conversion into aesthetic treasure trove.

Huelsenbeck's quip about Schwitters being the Caspar David Friedrich of the Dada revolution may indeed secrete a deeper truth. If *merzen* implies an act of appropriation, then it also reflects an impulse toward renewal: all my artistic efforts, Schwitters might be saying, contribute to a single purpose, which is to lay hold of what I recognize as mine, and to redeem it through its conversion into art. Which is to argue, after all, for the compatibility of his being both a nostalgic landscape painter and an avant-gardist on active duty at the cultural frontline. Indeed, a dialectical encounter of values is taking place here, and as viewers we should try to accept the coexistence of contraries as a stimulus to insight, embracing both nonsense and wisdom, chaos and continuity, confusion and clarity. Schwitters put the point in his usual mercurial manner when he wrote in the first issue of *Merz* that "THE TASK OF MERZ IN THIS WORLD IS TO BALANCE OUT OPPOSITES AND TO DEPLOY [DIFFERENT] CENTERS OF GRAVITY." (Lach 5, p.134)

The wartime collage *Untitled (DIFFICULT)* (1942–45, fig. 118) harks back to the busy proliferations of the twenties. It is typical of Schwitters's boisterous search for exciting material in the mundane. A relatively large work (79.5 x 61 cm), it seems extremely crowded, jamming together over a hundred paper shreds within a fanlike pattern. The effect is of an explosion stemming from the bottom of the image, with pieces spraying upwards and outwards. Unusually for Schwitters, there are some straightforward pictorial elements here. The commercial image of a car tire is set low down, while the tiny image of a biplane is placed higher up. An enigmatic section cut from a photo shows the torso of a seated woman in a patterned dress. Candy wrappers abound, and a familiar cluster of London bus tickets occupies the bottom righthand corner. The viewer's gaze is bound to be drawn to the boldly capitalized word DIFFICULT, placed unerringly at the center of the composition. This is in fact part of the title of a short story snipped from a magazine for women. Yet now—its origin having been 'de-formulated'—the word functions to make explicit the problem posed by the collage at large. It is a problem having to do with the processes of

reading and construal. At first glance, the collage stimulates frustration. There are no simple signposts here, no way of navigating smoothly between the textual litter disposed at arbitrary angles. Impatient viewers are likely to step back and declare they can see no more than an indiscriminate array. Others may recognize the care that has gone into this fabrication, yet conclude similarly that the result is still a mess, no more meaningful for being an *intended* mess. This is indeed all rather *difficult*. Are we looking at a piece of anarchic non-art, the irresponsible strewing of multiple centers of gravity? What is Schwitters hoping to convey? Is he saying "Here is a selection from my wastebin, take it or leave it"? Or is he asking us to tease out a latent theme or mood to which each separate piece contributes a special nuance? Can there be such a thing as an orderliness only reachable by dint of journeying through disorder? Much depends on our goodwill, our patience, our versatility, our imagination. Viewing is also a creative act.

Schwitters, it must be said, rarely makes things easy for his audience. And yet, while individual collages can seem pointless, overcrowded, or dowdy, the general momentum of his efforts does convey a sense of purpose and inventiveness. We can, as ordinary citizens, appreciate his prescient concern with the detritus of modern commerce and the mass media. We can learn to recognize the signs of his caprices, his commitments, his passions. The overall message transmitted by these works remains a positive one, namely, that, in a world divided and ravaged by war and social unrest, it is somehow possible still to believe in the values of art. Herein lies Schwitters's special contribution to the narrative of European Dada: for whereas some of the Zurich Dadaists thought art should be exposed as a cultural sham, and the Berlin group campaigned for a political revolution outside the artistic sphere, Schwitters kept his own counsel and, cultivating a modest though slightly eccentric demeanor, trained his unwavering sights upon his artistic utopia. Without retreating to a decadent realm of disconcern—art for art's sake—he insisted on seeing art as an exemplary activity and his prime reason for living. He aimed not to sabotage the world of material fact but rather to exercise a novel receptivity to things in the human and nonhuman environment, a posture governed by an admirable nonchalance allied to a sharp cultural and ethical awareness. His message is obscure, yet potent. In time, one may attune oneself to the charms of this aesthetic of the dilapidated, the overlooked. And to hear that frail voice from another age is a tenuous yet absorbing pleasure.

1 Raoul Hausmann, *Am Anfang war Dada*, 3rd edition, ed. Karl Riha and Günter Kampf (Giessen, 1992), p. 70.

2 John Elderfield invokes this informative snippet in *Kurt Schwitters* (London, 1985), p. 63.

3 Discussions of this well-known example of the political collage may be found in Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters* (Cambridge, MA, 1993), p. 53; Elderfield 1985 (see note 2), p. 73; and Annegreth Nill, "Die Zeitgeschichte," in *Kurt Schwitters 1887–1948*, exh. cat., Sprengel Museum (Hanover, 1987), p. 126.

4 See also Dietrich 1993 (see note 2), pp. 110–112, and Ernst Nündel, *Kurt Schwitters in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1981), pp. 26–27.

5 See Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters* (Munich, 1984), p. 114.

6 Schwitters to Hannah Höch, April 5, 1933, in Ralf Burmeister and Eckhard Fürlus, eds., *Hannah Höch: Eine Lebenscollage*, Part 2, vols. 1 and 2 (Berlin, 1995), p. 482.

7 Schwitters to Josef Albers, February 8, 1937, The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, Bethany, CT.

8 Schwitters to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., November 23, 1936, collection files, Department of Painting and Sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

9 An undated column topped with a plaster cast (OS 1199/10) of Gerd Schwitters's head (to commemorate the tenth anniversary of his death?) evidently stood in the cellar until about 1930. Despite its striking appearance, it is not mentioned by contemporaries.

10 Schwitters to Oskar Müller, February 24, 1939, in Gerhard Schaub, *Kurt Schwitters und die andere Schweiz* (Berlin, 1998), p. 33.

11 Letter to Oliver Kaufmann, April 10, 1946, MoMA (see note 8).

12 See Schmalenbach 1984 (see note 5), pp. 130–32, for a discussion of the i-drawings.

13 It is worth noting that actual photographs (as opposed to photographic illustrations taken from magazines and other printed sources) are a rarity in Schwitters's *oeuvre*, which thereby escapes comparison with the work of such avant-garde practitioners of *photomontage* as John Heartfield, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and László Moholy-Nagy.

The Writer

As a writer Schwitters deals with words in much the same spirit as he deals with his art materials. His texts exploit the small change of utterance and thrive on the vagaries and anomalies of language: its alliterations and assonances, its rhythms and rhymes, its capacity to generate neologisms, its hilarious homonyms, its fickle clichés, its habit of sidestepping away from, and then dodging back into, intelligibility. The writer's penchant for lawless improvisation sometimes fosters a capriciousness bordering on the infantile. It can seem as if the priority were simply to have fun, to indulge in anarchic doodling that hates to signify, and instead gushes forth into pools of laughter and mindless good cheer.

Certainly there is about Schwitters's approach a noticeable factor of anti-literary provocation, sometimes manifested in exaggerated parody, sometimes in numbing repetition, as when a single syllable or an invented word is harried into a semantic dead end. In certain respects, the writings reveal a kinship with Dadaism, which—in the literary expressions of Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and others—exhibited a robust antagonism toward clarity and correctness, preferring to deliver shoals of impudent non sequiturs in lieu of "proper" sentences, arguments, or messages.

Yet there is usually more to Dada writing than mere futility, for its very momentum conveys urgency and purpose, opening up fresh perspectives on expressivity. Schwitters's own ramblings are capable of engendering moments of lucidity wherein a seductive insight, or a certain zany consistency, testify to the author's underlying seriousness. As with the Merz collages, we learn to appreciate the shafts of sincerity and clarity that break through the deviousness and provide the incentive to read on.

The Poems

It was at the time of his earliest experiments in Merz artmaking that Schwitters hit upon a formula that earned him almost immediate notoriety thoughout the German-speaking cultures. The poem "An Anna Blume" (To Anna Flower, also published as "Eve Blossom"), published in *Der Sturm* magazine in August 1919, is a parody of the sentimental clichés of love poetry.[1] Moreover the text parades blatant errors of grammar that must have grated mercilessly on the ears of its first audiences in Weimar Germany, hinting at the mental deficiency of whoever was understood to be voicing the poem. Of course, Schwitters himself was perfectly sane, and there was considerable craft in his construction of the persona of the delirious, love-crazed idiot. The latter's outpourings are so preposterous as to raise a smile, and yet a note of genuine emotion comes across in the opening lines: "O thou, adorable of my seven and twenty senses, I love thine! / Thou, thine, thee thine, I thou, thou I, thou mine, - - - - us?"[2] (Lach 1, p. 58)

This, the first and best-known text in the Merz canon, can be envisaged as a straightforward love poem sabotaged by droll interpolations. These include grammatical aberrations, as when "ich liebe Dich" (I love you) becomes "ich liebe Dir" (the pronoun shifting from the accusative to the dative case, in defiance of grammatical rule); inconsequential asides ("[People] have no idea what's up with the church-tower"); surrealistic reversals ("You wear your hat on your feet and wander by on your hands"); a daft syllogism ("[1] Anna Blume has a bat in her belfry. / [2] Anna Blume is red. / [3] What color is the bat."); expressionistic distortions ("Blue is the color of your yellow hair"); and slippery vocabulary jokes ("I dribble your name. / Your name runs like beef dripping. / Did you know Anna, have you realized, / One can also read you backwards"). The lover's delight in discovering that his beloved's first name is a palindrome is consistent with Schwitters's frequently expressed belief that contraries are always exactly equivalent.

Launched with verve by Schwitters and his pals, who once smothered the windows of a street-car in Dresden with "Anna Blume" stickers, the name became a rallying-cry as potent as "Dada" itself. The author's Hanover publisher Paul Steegemann issued a volume of Schwitters's poetry in 1919 with "An Anna Blume" in prominence, and later printed the poem as a color poster (fig. 120). It was soon on everyone's lips. By the time of the Reichstag elections of 1920, the name had become that of a spoof candidate backed by the slogan "Vote Anna Blume," and it remained integral to Schwitters's astute self-publicity for many years.

The early poems often read as wilfully pallid pastiches of German Romantic verse such as the melancholy folk-like poems of Heinrich Heine or Wilhelm Hauff. A sonnet dated 1912 begins thus:

An
Anna Blume

O du, Geliebte meiner siebenundzwanzig Sinne, ich liebe dir! – Du deiner dich dir, ich dir, du mir. – Wir?
Das gehört (beiläufig) nicht hierher.
Wer bist du, ungezähltes Frauenzimmer? Du bist – – bist du? — Die Leute sagen, du wärest, – laß sie sagen, sie wissen nicht, wie der Kirchturm steht.
Du trägst den Hut auf deinen Füßen und wanderst auf die Hände, auf den Händen wanderst du.
Hallo, deine roten Kleider, in weiße Falten zersägt. Rot liebe ich Anna Blume, rot liebe ich dir! – Du deiner dich dir, ich dir, du mir. – Wir?
Das gehört (beiläufig) in die kalte Glut.
Rote Blume, rote Anna Blume, wie sagen die Leute?

Preisfrage:

1. Anna Blume hat ein Vogel.
2. Anna Blume ist rot.
3. Welche Farbe hat der Vogel?

Blau ist die Farbe deines gelben Haares.
Rot ist das Girren deines grünen Vogels.
Du schlichtes Mädchen im Alltagskleid, du liebes grünes Tier, ich liebe dir! – Du deiner dich dir, ich dir, du mir, – Wir?
Das gehört (beiläufig) in die Glutenkiste.
Anna Blume! Anna, a=n=n=a, ich träufle deinen Namen.
Dein Name tropft wie weiches Rindertalg.
Weißt du es, Anna, weißt du es schon?
Man kann dich auch von hinten lesen, und du, du Herrlichste von allen, du bist von hinten wie von vorne: „a=n=n=a“.
Rindertalg träufelt streicheln über meinen Rücken.
Anna Blume, du tropfes Tier, ich liebe dir!

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*Dies ist eine Probe aus dem schönen Buche „**Anna Blume**“ von Kurt Schwitters*
Es ist in allen Buchhandlungen vorrätig. Jeder Gebildete sollte es besitzen. Mk. 4.80

120 *To Anna Blume*, poster, 1920

I sat by my window, high in the storm's flood,
Rain crashed against the panes,
Gigantic clouds galloped wildly,
The gleaming streets were void and desolate. (Lach 1, p. 32)

Schwitters persisted with mood poetry of this sort into the twenties, now echoing the fashionable evocations of cultural collapse by Expressionists such as Jakob van Hoddis and Georg Heym, who applied traditional poetic techniques to accounts of disaster on an apocalyptic scale, the equivalent of Ludwig Meidner's paintings of bombarded cities. Schwitters drew on such material in starkly incongruous poems like "The World":

Houses are collapsing, the heavens are crashing down.
Trees are looming over trees.
Heaven greens red.
Silver fish go swimming in the air. (Lach 1, p. 37)

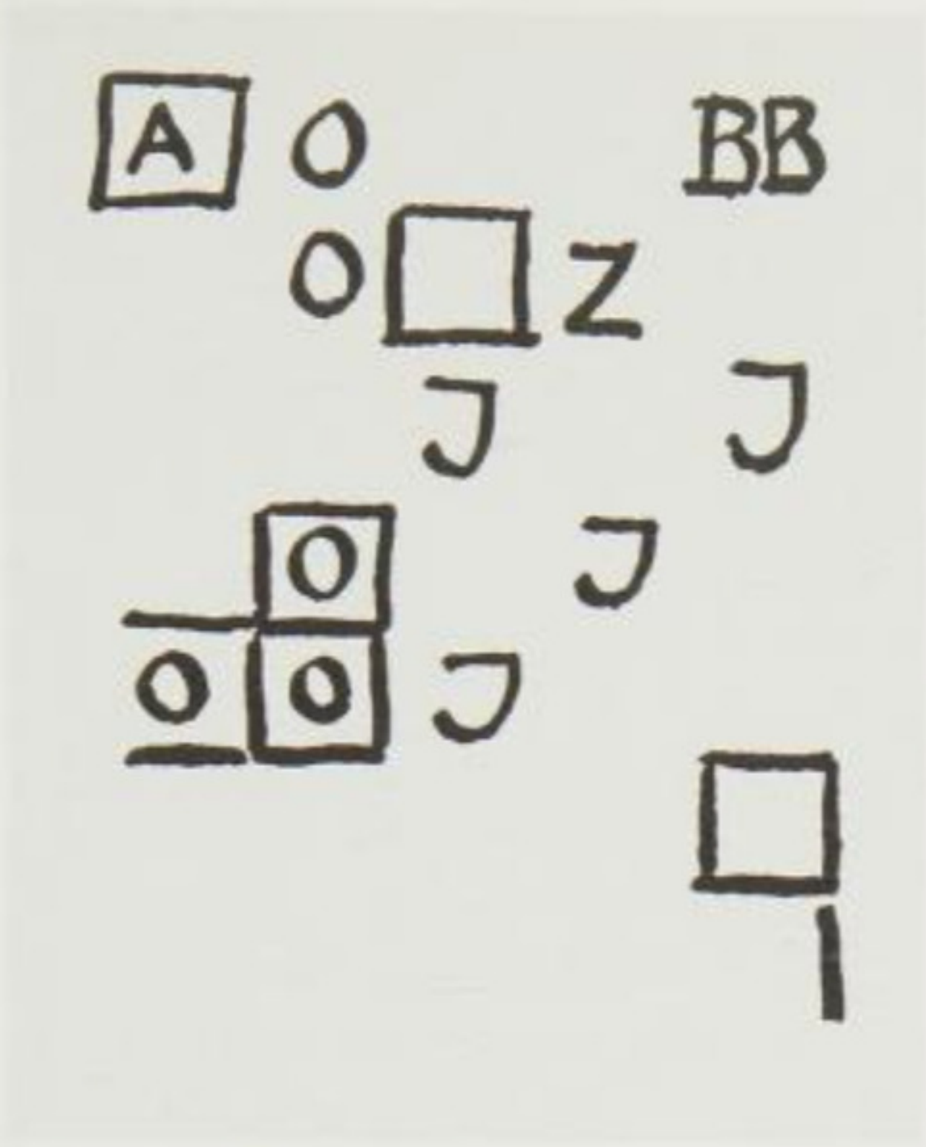
He also took his cue from the soldier-poet August Stramm, who, inspired by the concept of *parole in libertà* (words set free) propounded by Marinetti and the Italian Futurists, couched his visions of frontline combat in an idiom wrenched out of its normal groove and consisting of broken syllables, adjectives and nouns used as verbs, and a staccato and condensed syntax. Schwitters's poem "We" is curt and acidic.

We live
We struggle
We die
Firtree-vaulted world
To live deathly dumb
To struggle amid the gleam of bells
To die beneath exorbitant stars
Flames intone world (Lach 2, p. 42)

But Schwitters realized it was not enough to portray a ghastly reality in ghastly Expressionist colors. He moved on, turning upon the very substance of normal parlance, subverting commonplace phrases, smashing words into aimless particles, butchering syntax, and scattering the fragments across the page. The poem "Limits of a Bone" is reduced to eleven incoherent words: "Limits / Limits / Limits / A bone / A / Bone / Burying / Burying / A bone." (Lach 1, p. 44)

Such poetry flirts with sheer nonsense, yet still conveys feeling. Schwitters takes the next step and writes down disconnected phrases that create a puzzle-poetry of abstruse allusion. Thus, in its opening lines, "World full of Lunacy" takes the tomfooiery of "An Anna Blume" a step further: "I / You / He she it / We you they / A graveyard, / still alive trout-sauce far too loud." (Lach 1, p. 51) One poem enacts ekphrasis (the verbal "copying" of a visual artwork) by describing a drawing by Marc Chagall that shows a headless man, a fish resembling a playing card, and a farm animal sticking its head through a window. (Lach 1, p. 70) Here we are invited into a realm of inexplicable wonders, a space of semantic anarchy, yet of a weird consistency. In a sense, we are inside a recognizable world—that of nursery nonsense. Indeed, the reader may pick up echoes of children's rhymes by Wilhelm Busch, or the crafted nonsense of Christian Morgenstern's *Galgenlieder* (Gallows Songs). One poem mourns the passing of the last fly of summer; another describes the nocturnal love tryst between a glimmering cigarette butt and a glowworm. (Lach 1, pp. 102, 111) Yet another introduces us to "Milord Double-Mubble," who "possesses everything in twos / his is a double chin / with a double set of dimples therein. / He leads a double life / . . . And has a double wife." (Lach 1, p. 103) Such writing is amusing, though hardly of substance.

If it is true that few of Schwitters's excursions into the lyric mode aspire to deeper meaning, this does not imply a total lack of what has been termed "significant nonsense."[3] The apotheosis of such writing is reached in a series of so-called "concrete" poems, whose import inheres not in any surviving segment of reference, but purely in the visible layout upon the printed page of words or even isolated letters and numerals (fig. 121). This is the poetic extreme which Schwitters finally espouses, a stripping-down of discourse which can be construed as the literary equivalent to painterly abstraction. Thus the poem "Wand" (wall), after counting itself down to a start in a first line that reads "Five four three two one,"



121 *A O*, picture poem, 1922

stretches down the page using the word *Wand* (or its plural *Wände)* no less than thirty-four times. (Lach 1, p. 203) The sameness of repetition drains off the semantic residue of the word, so that the reader is instead diverted into noticing the variant shapes of lower and upper case type, as well as small and large fonts. Such typographical experimentation was common to both Italian Futurism and Dadaism; while the reduction of words to nonreferential sounds is reminiscent of the *zaum* poetry of the Russian Futurists.

Aware as he was of the recitations given by the Dada group at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Schwitters was enthused by the notion of the interplay of letters and their associated sounds, and devised several scripts for public performance. One of these is the poem "Sneezing Scherzo," which mimics the successive sounds of an enormous sneeze and takes forty-four lines to reach its comic and devastating climax. (Lach 1, pp. 244–45) Even less dependent on recognizable reference is Schwitters's masterly orchestration of abstract sonorities, the *Ursonate* (primal sonata).

The *Ursonate*

It was in 1921, when Kurt Schwitters and Raoul Hausmann were exploring the dramatic scenery of Saxon Switzerland, that Schwitters began to recite a sound poem by Hausmann, again and again, like a catchy tune: *fmsbwtözäu* … Hausmann was annoyed at this appropriation of his poem and resented it ever afterwards; a quarter of a century later he was still writing to Schwitters to complain. His continuing anger resulted from the fact that Schwitters had treated his letter sequence as Merz material, using it as the explosive opening theme of his *Ursonate*, a thirty-five-minute symphony of sound. (Lach 1, pp. 214–42)

Sound poetry has a long history, but the genre took on a new role in the early twentieth century when the Futurist *parole in libertà* became a weapon in avant garde's revolt against social norms. Schwitters was familiar with the experimental poems of Arp, Van Doesburg, and other colleagues, and had also encountered wordless verse in the Sturm gallery in Berlin, where he took recital lessons with Rudolf Blümner, a self-proclaimed pioneer of sound poetry. The *Ursonate*, however, was the mongrel in the pack. One reason it infuriated Hausmann was because it seemed to pander to the very audience that sound poetry aimed to enrage. If it were not sufficient to link an anarchic Dada work to an icon of bourgeois culture, the *Ursonate* positively flaunted its similarity to late eighteenth-century sonata form, with four movements—in this case, an exuberant Rondo, an unsentimental Largo, a cheery Scherzo, and a disquieting Presto—whose structures its author unashamedly laid open to analysis in print. It has irritated musical and literary experts ever since, but it remains forever popular with audiences, and is better known and more often performed than any other sound poem.

Schwitters first published sections of the *Ursonate* in 1923. Others followed during the decade, but he was dissatisfied with his endeavors to design a layout. He hoped to enlist Lissitzky's aid, but met with a lukewarm response, and his attempt to persuade Katherine Dreier to publish the *Ursonate* in the United States likewise failed. In 1926 he approached the pioneering German typographer Jan Tschichold, then a lecturer at the German Master Printers' School in Munich. Tschichold's version of the full text was published by Schwitters in 1932 (fig. 122).

Schwitters gave explicit instructions on how his sonata was to be performed, while emphasizing that, as with any musical score, various interpretations are possible. He supplied a ready-made cadenza, but encouraged performers to invent their own. "I myself perform a different cadenza each time, which allows it … to sound especially alive and provide a strong contrast to the rigid sonata."[4] What he perceived as "rigidity" arose from his own often-stated but rarely realized principle that a work of art should be consistent and self-contained, with all parts interrelated, referring to nothing outside itself. The *Ursonate* and the *Merzbau*, which Schwitters regarded as his greatest works, constitute two opposite

trio *(äußerst langsam vorzutragen.)*

Ziiuu iiuu	(N)	3
ziiuu aauu		
ziiuu iiuu		
ziiuu Aaa		
Ziiuu iiuu		3
ziiuu aauu		
ziiuu iiuu		
ziiuu Ooo		
Ziiuu iiuu		3
ziiuu aauu		
ziiuu iiuu		
scherzo		III
Lanke trr gll *(munter)*	(O)	8
pe pe pe pe pe		
Ooka ooka ooka ooka		
Lanke trr gll		III
Pii pii pii pii pii		9
Züüka züüka züüka züüka		
Lanke trr gll		III
Rrmmp		4
Rrnnf		
Lanke trr gll		
Ziiuu lenn trll?		3
Lümpff tümpff trll		10
Lanke trr gll		II
Rrumpff tilff too		4
Lanke trr gll		III
Ziiuu lenn trll?		3
Lümpff tümpff trll		10

122 *Merz 24. Ursonate*, 1932, typography by Jan Tschichold

poles of his oeuvre, for in contrast to the *Merzbau*'s unpredictable plasticity, the *Ursonate* displays a tight, controlled composition. It was this scrupulous approach to form, laid bare in the printed version, that Schwitters aimed to overcome in the sparkling performances that delighted contemporaries. As he had a good musical memory, he quickly learned his sonata by heart and perfected it by repeating it incessantly on all possible occasions. When commissioned to provide stairwell murals for a Hamburg jeweler, he recited it in rhythmic accompaniment to his brushstrokes (to the utmost displeasure of other residents). Hans Arp recalled hearing an apparently disembodied Schwitters reciting the *Ursonate* while perched high in a tree, and many others told similar stories.

One of the first recitals of the complete work took place in 1925 in a private house in Potsdam. Sixty people attended, among them the Dadaist Hans Richter. As the hostess was a socialist and pacifist, his account (written nearly forty years later) of an audience of retired generals and their dignified wives collapsing in an orgy of laughter may be somewhat embroidered. Nonetheless, Schwitters's recital in Prague in 1926 had a similar effect on the audience, and in 1929 his performance brought an international architectural conference in Frankfurt am Main to a standstill. Sigfried Giedion, one of the organizers, wrote an article describing the *Ursonate* as one of the few examples of contemporary literature that would survive the age and pleaded for a publicly available gramophone record. Schwitters had already produced a record of himself reciting the Scherzo in 1925 and followed it with two radio broadcasts in 1930 and 1932, but each time only of excerpts.

In March 1933, storm troopers raided the offices of the German Master Printers' School and the private apartment of the director Paul Renner (in his absence), and impounded his copy of the *Ursonate*, described in the official report of the raid as a "Bolshevist sonata." With the existence of the printed edition—and indeed his own existence—imperiled, Schwitters became even more concerned to make the work available abroad, but the adversities of exile persistently told against him. As with the *Merzbau*, he was desperate to ensure its survival for posterity, and only weeks before he died he tried to arrange a trip to the United States to make a radio broadcast. Nothing came of this or any of his earlier efforts, and he never recorded the whole sonata. For contemporaries, however, his performances remained an unforgettable experience, most especially for the internees of Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man. In later years, one recalled, former Hutchinsonians would always greet each other with "Lanke trr gll pii pii" and "Ooka, ooka."[5]

These are only two of the nineteen themes of the *Ursonate*, both from the Scherzo. Even Schwitters was not concerned to convince us these were literally primal sounds, for he admitted that some derived from ordinary words (*Dedesnn nn rrrrr* is a modification of "Dresden," for instance) and noted that German pronunciation was to be used throughout. The *Ursonate*'s appeal is nonetheless universal, relying neither on a knowledge of German nor of musical form, and it contains a measure of comedy, self-deprecating parody, and subversive humor that can be revealed only in performance.

Is the *Ursonate* music or poetry? Today it tends to be classed as literature, though Schwitters himself wrote of it more in musical terms. Charles Ives refused to set it to music, saying it was music already; John Cage also saw it as music, if of kindergarten standard. Schwitters was not a complete musical amateur, however. He was an accomplished pianist, and even in exile in Norway and in London allowed himself the luxury of a piano. In the twenties he worked with a number of musicians, including the great pianist Walter Gieseking, and he was acquainted with the composers Stefan Wolpe and Paul Bowles, who both wrote music inspired by his poems. He possessed an extensive range of sheet music, scores, and reference works that bear witness to his wide musical interests and pianistic skills, though he often bemoaned his inability to compose. All the more surprising then that between 1927 and 1940 he translated parts of the *Ursonate* into conventional musical notation. He left these musical sketches in Norway and never resumed work on the project again.

For all its strict adherence to form, the *Ursonate* extends the boundaries of both poetry and music. Schwitters hoped it would aid others experimenting with such a synthesis, and in this sense, the sonata's anomalies emerge as its strength, not its weakness. Merz remains the art of enquiry, posing questions rather than providing answers, and as an adroit Schwitterian *tour de force*, the

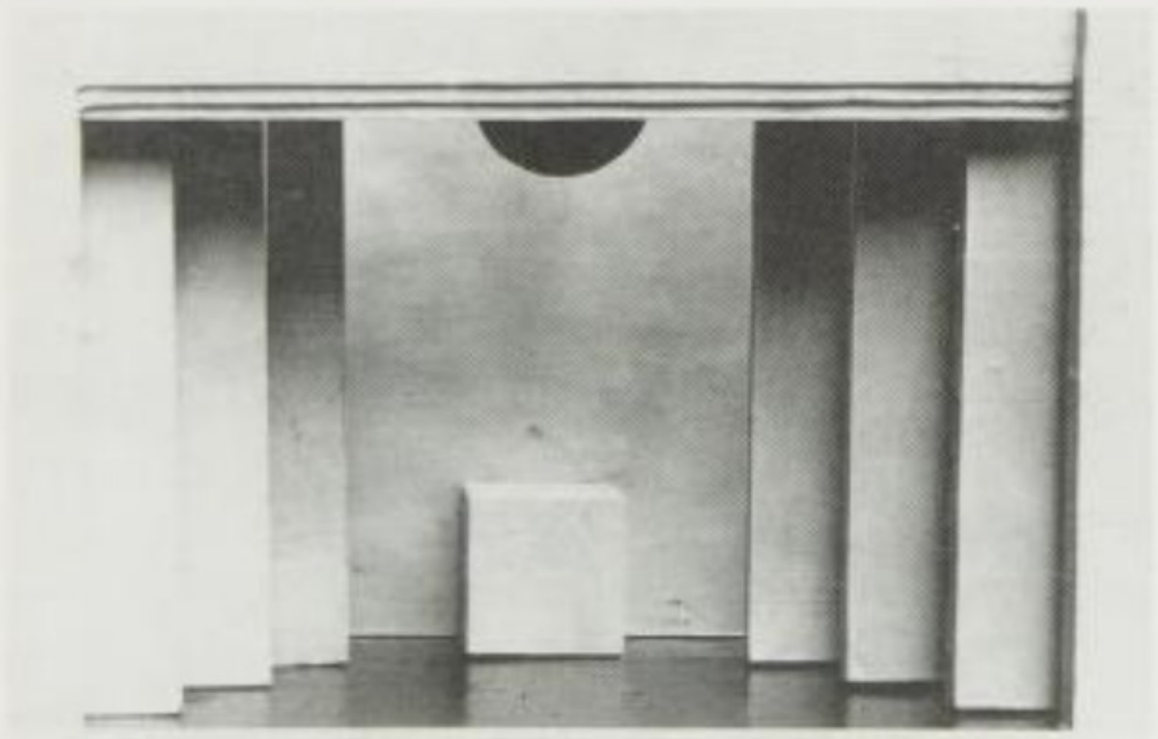
Ursonate (flouting all the conventions of sonata practice) never comes to a true end. It closes with the alphabet recited backwards, ending—painfully, according to the author's instructions—on the letter B, with a question mark to supplant the final letter A.

Theater, Performances, Dramas

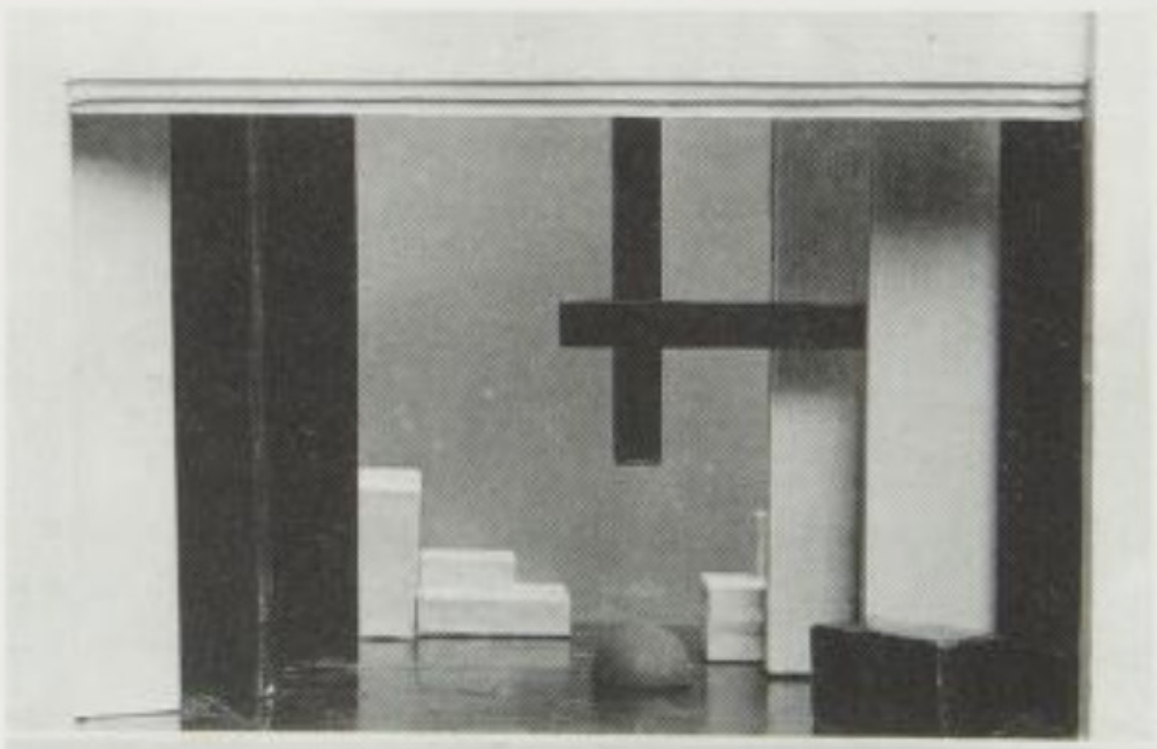
Schwitters's first Merz manifesto of 1919 was a modest document compared to the defiant avant-garde proclamations of his age. It asserted the artist's right to use any material and listed examples: cotton wool, for example, may represent softness. Three months later, Merz had expanded, or better erupted, into the world of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In a new and far more forceful text, Schwitters claimed that Merz could encompass all the arts and unite them in a *Merzbühne*. "I demand the Merz stage. I demand the complete combination of all artistic forces in the attainment of the total work of art. I demand the principle of equality of all materials." (Lach 5, p. 39) This time, however, his examples take the form of a lengthy series of unworkable instructions. We are commanded to build a giant Merz assemblage from an avalanche of machinery and materials, pulsating surfaces and writhing lines, creating a spectacle that reaches an orgasmic climax in a cacophony of mechanical and human sounds and the squirting of foam.

> Take giant surfaces, conceived as infinite, cloak them in color, twist and push them around menacingly, disfigure their smooth shamefulness. . . . Then take wheels and axles, hurl them up and let them sing (Watergiant holdover). Axles dance mid-wheel roll spheres barrel. Ratchet wheels sense ratchets, find a sewing machine that yawns. Screwing up or hunkered down, the sewing machine beheads itself, feet up . . . Take lights and deform them in the most brutal manner. Let locomotives crash into one another.[6]

What prompted the sober Hanoverian Schwitters, a novice in the world of the avant garde, to launch his readers into such outrageous fantasies? In 1919 his revolutionary mood was fueled by the condemnations of his critics and the violent, volatile atmosphere of Berlin, and a fitting model for staging a Merz protest lay at hand in Herwarth Walden's Sturm organization. With his *Sturmabende* (Sturm soirées) and Expressionist plays, Walden had from the first provided a forum for experimental drama in an age when theaters served as bulwarks of a rigidly censored culture firmly in the grasp of the wealthy bourgeoisie. Inspired by the writings of Kandinsky, Walden and his theater manager Lothar Schreyer set out their ideas



123 *Standard Merz Stage*, 1924
Photograph of the original model



124 *Standard Merz Stage, scene* change, 1924.
Photograph of the original model

for Expressionist theater as a total work of art. Sounds, music, gestures, lighting, forms, and colors became independent means of expression; sets were abstract, characters replaced by types, and costumes (for women at least) no longer a must. Sturm theater aspired to be intense, innovative, and controversial, and as a Sturm associate, Schwitters rose to the challenge in *Die Merzbühne*, with its insistent, incantatory style and wild imagery. Nonetheless, it reads more as a caricature than an emulation of Expressionist dramas, with their accent on solemnity, spirituality, and the sublime. Schwitters constantly resorts to the banal object and subverts his own text by the use of alienation effects, cliché, and self-parody. His props include dentist's drills, leaking pipes, and art critics; children are admitted half-price; and his frenzied Merz set fades away to the sighing melody of a violin.

Die Merzbühne addressed a highly select readership at first, and in contexts that ensured its rowdy, absurd arena remained a strictly theoretical construct, a Merz utopia in which anything might serve as Merz material. Schwitters published his essay in *Der Sturm* theater journal in 1919, fittingly introducing his Merz stage as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and also in his first anthology of Merz poetry, prefaced by an introduction by a fictional character to lend it literary status. In 1920, he included part of *Die Merzbühne* in an autobiographical essay published in *Der Ararat*, the journal of a successful Munich gallery, and noted that he was considering its practical possibilities. He realized these in two ways: first, by constructing a portable model of a Merz stage, and second, by his implementation of a live Merz theater.

Schwitters's *Normalbühne Merz* (standard *Merz* stage, figs. 123, 124) was a scale model of an economical, flexible, and transportable stage. In 1924 he exhibited it in Vienna at the *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* (International Exhibition of New Theater Technology) organized by the pioneering designer Frederick Kiesler, and he also designed a *Raumbühne* (circular stage), exhibited in New York in 1926. He took it for granted that his functional Merz stages would be greeted with skepticism and suspicion, but by now he saw such negative reactions in a new light. Lothar Schreyer tried to ban potential detractors from his cult Sturm theater, inviting only a handpicked circle of initiates; Schwitters not only engaged with audiences who were not attuned to the avant garde but incorporated their protests into his performances. This strategy—exceptional in its time—is demonstrated in his fictional dialogue *Aus der Welt Merz* (From the World of Merz, 1922), published both in *Der Sturm* and in the 1924 Vienna catalogue. Written in collaboration with the theater director Franz Rolan, it illustrates how a hostile audience may be involved in a Merz performance.

The scene opens with Schwitters lecturing on Merz drama. He explains that it affords great potential for creativity because it relies on spontaneous contributions from the audience: as Merz artist and director, he is simultaneously leader and led. He then darkens the room, displays a silly—but genuine—shop advertisement without comment, listens to the audience's voluble protests, then explains that they have just experienced a Merz play. Finally he explains that art is a matter of impulses given and received, so that the most fertile basis for the creation of a Merz work is an uninformed, disapproving audience. In reviewing his Holland Dada campaign of 1923, Schwitters likewise described audience resistance as the actors' chief weapon; in Utrecht, he related, the spectators' protests were so disruptive that Nelly van Doesburg announced that *they* were now the Dadaists, and the actors could sit back and watch the show.

In *Aus der Welt Merz*, the artist, aided by his trivial props, functions as a catalyst, arousing heated discussions, confusing identities and goading his listeners to respond open-mindedly to the unusual and untried, rather than, as he puts it, like an old nag with blinkers. This was to become the model for the Merz performances Schwitters gave in various towns in Germany and abroad, in his own home as part of his Merz evenings, and on numerous impromptu occasions: in cafés, on train journeys, at friends' houses, and (if only once) at an official banquet during the Third Reich. As his friends often emphasized, he was a charismatic entertainer and a master at steering audience reactions. "He barked, he sniffled, he yelled; his body, his hands vibrated with the rhythm of his words, hypnotizing, flabbergasting his audience," wrote Stefan Themerson. "His dramatic performance evoked incredible stage effects. One saw what was actually not there; the machines, cars

and locomotives colliding."[7] Schwitters himself wrote that he recited with great pleasure, whatever the outcome, but then unnerving his public was part of the show. In Dresden a privately invited audience in formal dress gazed in dismay at his shorts and rucksack, and at the stentorian climax of his poem "Wall," the gardener rushed in, suspecting a murder. Of all the numerous accounts of his performances, those of his recitals in Douglas internment camp are the most moving. He would repeat the word "Silence" in a riveting crescendo that culminated in the smashing of a cup and saucer—scarcities in the camp. As a fellow internee recalled, "the sheer audacity, combined with the perversions of screaming the word "Silence," suddenly released in the refugees all the pent-up frustrations of being interned, being treated as enemies, being victimized by officialdom. It was a cathartic experience."[8]

The Weimar Republic was the great age of the performing arts, and Schwitters's participation in this field rapidly expanded from monologue—the chaotic, hermetic, fantasy Merz theater, with its passive emphasis on the literary and visual—to dialogue, in the form of live and, where possible, interactive performances that focused on the potential of the interface, the borderline, and the intermediary. After the breakdown of the Weimar Republic, however, these were investigations that he was only able to pursue in the *Merzbauten*.

Schwitters's most ambitious theatrical venture was a multimedia extravaganza written together with Kate Steinitz. Named *Der Zusammenstoss* (The Collision), it won an award in Vienna in 1927, though the first production had to wait until 1976. He wrote many other scenes and plays, even in exile, but apart from a few Dadaist sketches, they are generally conventional in style, and the majority remain unfinished. Over half are either semiautobiographical or center upon characters who are recognizably family members or friends, and many feature his tyrannical mother-in-law. His final drama, *Die Familiengruft* (The Family Grave) of 1946, portrays her as the committed Nazi she was, in a black comedy in which she tries to enforce National Socialism on the realm of the dead.[9] Like almost all Schwitters's dramas, however, it was never performed in his lifetime.

Prose Fiction

Schwitters's early prose fictions are tight little exercises in the irrational mode, often developing out of an initial proposition that is forthwith refuted, discarded, interrupted, or expanded beyond the point of reason. The authorial voice proceeds at an even pace and without apology, accumulating arbitrary associations. But whereas the poems shy away from sustained coherence, Schwitters's prose improvisations tend to unfold at greater length and in so doing, to release definite intimations of ultimate sense; albeit these may prove, as often as not, to be illusory. At once quirky and purposeful, such writing caters to a readership tolerant of absurdity. Linked to the general ambitions of Merz, it reflects a strategy of tacit indoctrination whereby the reader is being persuaded to contemplate the unforeseen without trepidation. He or she becomes an apprentice in the art of tolerance, learning to maintain equipoise amid the erosion of certainty.

Several early pieces are striking in their violence. "The Onion" (1919) is a bloodthirsty tale in which the first-person narrator relates how he is ritually executed and dismembered by the court butcher before being reconstituted and exacting revenge on the king, blowing him up by thrusting two burning candles into his innards. (Lach 2, pp. 22–27) The hilariously grim shaggy-dog story "He" (1923) concerns a soldier who cannot stop growing, despite being arrested and imprisoned for this involuntary defect. The text calmly follows its premise to its logical conclusion, which entails the building of larger and larger prisons and the unfortunate's eventual demise when he is ordered into the ocean and drowns. (Lach 2, pp. 97–105) "My Suicide" (1925–26) is another exercise in the fantastical-preposterous, the report of a man whose successive suicide attempts come to nothing, since he systematically shies away from all hint of danger. He winds up as a married man with fifty-nine children, and concludes that marital union is a far worse fate than suicide ever was. (Lach 2, pp. 265–69)

"The Roosterpeter" (1924) starts out with the discovery of a flat egg by a young man, who is told it was laid by a cockerel and needs to be left behind the stove for thirteen days if it is to hatch. The eccentric tale was printed in an exaggerated typeface and included illustrations of the stove, the caricatural 'roosterpeter'

DA kam ein Geist dem einst der HUT gehöret hatte und holte seinen HUT
DA kam als Geist das Edelfräulein
dem einst der Spitzenschal gehöret hatte
und holte seinen SPITZENSCHAL
DA kam ein frecher Bursch und stahl dem Bauersmann aus seiner Hand den STOCK
und
DA WARDS HELL!
UT
UT
UT
UT

125 Kurt Schwitters, Kate Steinitz, and Theo van Doesburg, *The Scarecrow. A Fairy Tale (Merz 14/15)*, 1925

emerging from its shell, and the ship's propeller that it boasts in lieu of a tail, and which ends up carrying it aloft and out of sight. (Lach 2, pp. 109–39) Another tale, "The Scarecrow" (1923), was a collaboration between Schwitters and his friends Kate Steinitz and Theo van Doesburg, who devised a layout in which blue and red capital letters enact the battle between a cockerel and a scarecrow. (Lach 2, 155–67; fig. 125) "The Umbrella" (1927) is about an old lady who cannot accept the fact that her brolly should suddenly fall apart after fifty years' loyal service and accuses the landlord of a hostelry of having ravaged it with his penknife. (Lach 1, 335–38) Like many such pieces, the text seems inconsequential, yet nags at the reader's mind, as if purporting to contain an allegorical message.

Somewhat reminiscent of the schoolboy essays written in deadpan style by the Swiss novelist Robert Walser are Schwitters's short, mock-earnest texts which cover such banal topics as "My New Hat," "My New Motorbike," "Tomatoes," and "The Railway." Other pieces announce their easygoing frivolity in their very title: "The Carbonized Goldfish," "The Man with the Glass Nose," "The Fish and the Ship's Propeller," or "The Doll with the Squint." This last makes play with a familiar opening: "Once upon a time there was a boy who loved reading fairy tales, that's how it begins." (Lach 2, p. 319) The first statement establishes a reassuring foothold within the conventions of nursery storytelling, only for the second one to turn critical, undermining convention by reminding the reader that the writer is at work, and needs no help with starting a fairy tale properly, yet also communicating a secondary thought: "that's how it begins" could also imply something like "you should know that fairy tales always start with things going wrong."[10]

126 *Merz Picture 46 A. The Skittle Picture*, 1921

"Things going wrong" is indeed a recurrent theme of this storyteller; moreover, "one thing always leads to another," for a single scatty premise can generate unlimited prospects of absurdity. Thus the story "Our Baby, the Elephant" (1926–27) tells of a childless couple who long for a family and are given a present of an infant elephant. The creature is called Baby and it devours everything in sight and treads on the lodger's toes, before suddenly giving birth to twenty-five babies of its own. The long-suffering husband narrates all this without rancor, commenting ruefully on each fresh disaster with the recurrent phrase "alles was recht ist" (all of which is just as it should be). (Lach 2, pp. 297–302)

If many tales adopt the standard fairy-tale setting of an imagined realm outside modernity, others take place in a contemporary city rather like Hanover. "Two Gentlemen" (1922) tells of two strangers meeting on the street and exchanging a crescendo of insults, before making it up and adjourning to the Club for the Improvement of Culture. (Lach 2, pp. 52–53) Another piece gives advice on how to sneak into a cinema without paying: one simply slips in backwards through the exit, exploiting "negative speed." (Lach 2, p. 214) Schwitters's prose masterpiece, the novella-length *Augusta Bolte*, is also set in the city.[11] (Lach 1, pp. 68–93) It is a compelling exercise in perseverance in that its heroine, the redoutable Augusta, is assailed by endless demands and tests, just as the reader is in turn assailed by the unalleviated momentum of the text.

Presented as "a doctoral dissertation with footnotes," the narrative presents a series of troubling events which propel Augusta into the pursuit of understanding. She is the embodiment of good sense set down in a world of non sequiturs and contradictions, a novice, as it were, in the very world of Merz. Augusta's doubts about her environment are first aroused when she spots a file of ten people walking in the same direction, and they are compounded when the group splits into two, with five people leaving in one direction and five in another. "Something had to be happening," the text advises, as if pressing the banal circumstance into a crisis. Obliged to follow the two groups alternately if she is to get to the bottom of the matter, Augusta shuttles between each, racing faster and faster, hither and thither, in a quest for certainty that can only lead to frustration. A number of slapstick incidents ensue, such as Augusta shedding the ballast of handbag, rings, and skirt, in order to sprint faster. A girl named Anna appears to hold the key to the mystery, but fails to explain anything. Eventually our heroine loses her temper, commits various acts of violence, and surrenders to complete disorientation. Rather than qualify for her doctorate in Life Studies, as we had been led to expect, she ends up being dumped by a taxi-driver somewhere outside the city. Whereupon, twenty-odd pages into his narrative, the author callously abandons her, insisting that he has nothing else to say. The reader may lack an explanation, but "the reader has no right, at least not the right to learn anything from a work of art." Hence we are left high and dry, faced with two options: either to dismiss the entire story as exasperating nonsense, or to convert our bewilderment into something more positive. Is *Augusta Bolte* simply a word-game, empty of significance? Or is it a serious, if somewhat arcane, statement about the enigma of the human condition? Have we missed something vital?[12] With Schwitters we may never know, since his implicit message seems always to be that things are significant and meaningless in equal measure. Werner Schmalenbach contends that "the 'world' which Schwitters makes palpable in his Merz prose and which lights up like a signal, often in only a fleeting reference, is nothing less than the highly acute, very contemporary, very oppressive present within which people were living in Germany during the early postwar years."[13] Which would imply that absurdity *is* the truth of the matter and that Merz is simply a more accurate way of assessing the alarming facts of existence.

Sayings and Slogans

Schwitters was always fond of pithy aphorisms and slogans and often adopted popular sayings, which he subverts through some small twist or alteration. In his essay "Banalities," he praises Paul Éluard's solo magazine *Proverbe* for its Dadaistic presentation of platitudes, and admits he often slips commonplaces into his own texts as a compositional ploy. (Lach 5, p. 148) For, just as decontextualized phrases impart energy to the collages, so irrelevant asides keep his readership on its toes, in a linguistic territory of

ever-startling novelty. One English-language poem, composed in 1946 in the British capital, is called "Happy Days: London Symphony." It evokes busy shopping streets by citing a string of eye-catching public notices, such as "Gentlemans [sic] hairdressing," "Apply third floor!," "Dig for Victory," and "Light refreshments." (Lach 1, p. 155–56)

One authorial pastime was to pick out the pedestrian utterances of famous authors, such as "Must always enjoy the present" (Goethe), "Young people have existed in every age" (Kasimir Edschmid), and "My heart is like the ocean" (Heinrich Heine). (Lach 1, p. 173) The young poet Otto Nebel is cited as observing that "The dead have no more use for their heads." (Lach 2, p. 49) Doris Thatje, the old seamstress who worked in the Schwitters household in Hanover, is credited with a wiser adage: "One always wishes everyone good luck, whereas bad luck comes unbidden." (Lach 2, p. 69)

Alles Lautgedicht.

HHH HH HH HHH
HHH
HHH HHH
AAA
O la la la O A O A la la

Phinax (1. 7. 1847.)

Neue Unterschrift.
(zu Art. DADA complet in Merz 1.)

i GEDICHTE, gefunden von Moholy-Nagy.

Vergangenheit:
Ich hatte, Du hattest, er sie es hatte, wir hatten, Ihr hattet, sie hatten.

Zukunft:
Ich werde haben, Du wirst haben, er sie es wird haben, wir werden haben, Ihr werdet haben, sie werden haben.

RIRA BIEN QUI RIRA LE DERNIER
T. FRAENKEL.

MPD Mancher hat noch nichts von der Merzpartei Deutschland gehört. Begreiflich, da sie nur aus einem Mitgliede, aus mir, besteht. Näheres siehe Merz 3. MERZ

Wohl ihm, dem sein Geschick liebend auf beiden gefällt.
Wer einmal Sauhund ist, der bleibt auch Sauhund.

DIE ZUTE TUTE.

Es as hja yn de poede scarh.
Dan wieren d'r reade kjrsiren yn.
Und ab sie in die Tüte sah,
Da waren rote Kirschen drin.
Dan makke hja de poede licht,
Dan wier de poede licht
De wae die TUTE en. K. S.

37

127 *Merz 4. Banalities*, p. 37, July 1923

Fourth *Merz* journal (fig. 127) was devoted to a collection of "Banalities from the Chinese," which includes such interlinked *bons mots* as "Eile ist des Witzes Weile" (Haste is the leisure time of the joke), "Würze ist des Witzes Kürze" (Spice is the brevity of the joke) or "Fliegen haben kurze Beine" (Flies have short legs). (Lach 1, p. 170) More intrinsically valuable are those occasional aphorisms which offer insight into Schwitters's philosophy. Maxims such as "Merz is the consequential art" (Lach 1, p. 175), "Alongside experience, comparison is man's best teacher" (Lach 5, p. 336), or "There are no accidents" (Lach 2, p. 28) are spontaneous coinages that epitomize the Merz outlook.

The Manifestos

The fifth volume of Schwitters's literary works comprises nigh on 200 essays, around ninety percent of which date to the twenties, the period of his most active efforts as the publicist and lone practitioner of Merz. Several polemical pieces attack professional critics by name, and show that Merz was no private pastime but a dynamic cultural campaign. The manifesto was an elective medium of the early avant garde, and Schwitters habitually uses it to outline his creative projects and lambast his enemies. As Friedhelm Lach observes, his idiom is down to earth, and his tone "theatrical, cynical, cheeky, and eccentric." (Lach 5, p. 16) During 1919–24 Schwitters issued no less than fifty squibs under the jokey heading *Tran* (cod-liver oil) as medicine for his critics, defending himself against those who had ruled that "stuck-on scraps of paper and trouser-patches" could not possibly be art. (Lach 5, p. 53) "Critics are cosmic particles," he sneers. (Lach 5, p. 67) One unfortunate, the Berlin critic Paul Westheim, is put roundly in his place: "You write against art, and the reason for this, let me inform you, is that you cannot stand the greatness of art." (Lach 5, p. 72)

A crucial early piece is "On Merz Painting," published in *Der Sturm* in July 1919 as an exposition of the principles of Merz com-

position, already equated with Abstraction. The earliest text on the virtues of recycling, it includes an inventory of the sorts of rubbish necessary to Merz production and ventures the serious theoretical proposition whereby "the word *Merz* means essentially the assembly of all imaginable materials for artistic ends, and technically, the evaluation of all individual materials as equal on principle." (Lach 5, p. 37) A good many essays deal with the perennial issue of Abstraction, while a few focus upon such sidelines as the i-drawings, or on specific works, such as the assemblage *Castle and Cathedral with Courtyard Well* (1922). Schwitters chuckles over the interest in the object shown by the streetcar conductor when Helma traveled home one day, having taken the ungainly maquette to be photographed. The text then switches to an enlightening discussion of Merz in relation to architecture. Published in Bruno Taut's avant-garde magazine *Frühlicht*, the text gives an invaluable glimpse into Schwitters's ambitious ideas on architecture, including his vision of a Merz approach to town planning. (Lach 5, p. 95–96)

Schwitters is tireless in offering his reader cogent statements of principle: "Art is exclusively the balance achieved through the equal evaluation of all components" (Lach 5, p. 168); "Merz means being consequential. Merz means establishing relationships, best of all between all the things in the world" (Lach 5, p. 187); "Art is never an imitation of nature, for art *is* nature itself"(Lach 5, p. 245). The outstanding manifesto from the thirties is "Ich und meine Ziele"(Myself and My Aims) of 1931, which appeared in the twenty-first issue of the journal *Merz*. Here Schwitters is adamant about defending the principle of the autonomy of art and deplores its submission to political goals. "For me, art is much too valuable to be misused as a tool. Personally I'd rather keep my distance from contemporary political events," he writes. (Lach 5, p. 340) And again: "Art does not wish to influence or to be efficacious, but seeks to liberate [humans] from life, from all those things which weigh them down, such as nationalist, political, or economic struggles." Schwitters insists that only abstract art can truly reflect its epoch, and that it represents "the art of the next thousand years." One can hardly miss the tacit dismissal of the Nazi dream of a millennial empire.

The text of this same manifesto goes on to discuss the Merz process, focusing upon the structure dubbed *Kathedrale des erotischen Elends* (The Cathedral of Erotic Misery), which Schwitters acknowledges as a conglomerate of successive additions, like a city which evolves as new components are laid over the "corpses" of old ones. The argument is not altogether clear, but there is no ambiguity about Schwitters's doughty pronouncement that he is fully aware of being an artist of great importance, and will remain so for all time. He adds "I state this with utter emphasis, so that people don't say later on, 'The poor fellow had no idea how important he was.'" (Lach 5, p. 346) He goes on to declare that the efforts of non-aligned artists are "neither idiocy nor a subjective game, but the expression of our time, dictated by time itself." (Lach 5, p. 346) These lofty assertions are voiced in an oratorical tone bordering on megalomania, mitigated by an underlying note of irony. For Schwitters must have known whom he was mimicking in the interests of self-propaganda: one can read his militant claims as a riposte to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

The Letters

Throughout his life, Schwitters was a prolific correspondent, addressing greetings, anecdotes, complaints, and sundry requests to his family, to his friends and colleagues, to curators, dealers, and collectors, and to various persons outside the art world. A selection of these manifold communications came out in 1974 under the heading *Wir spielen, bis uns der Tod abholt*.[14] They reveal a man always on the verge of being overwhelmed by his many projects, yet never at a loss for a joke or a pun. Schwitters's letters tell of his artistic preoccupations, his travels and enforced exile, his moods, and his tricky dealings with clients—potential purchasers of his artworks and publications—and contribute to a complex portrait of an ambitious artist and cultural activist who was also a loving husband, father, and friend.

One loyal correspondent was the American artist and curator Katherine S. Dreier, who helped show his work in New York in the twenties and was instrumental in setting up a link with the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in the last months of his life. Several letters from Schwitters urge her to hasten the appreciation of his work in America, where he felt he had more chance of success than in Europe. In 1925, he tells her he would love to make a film with

Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, and wonders if America might be ready for one of his Merz evenings.

Other letters are addressed to contacts in the art world, such as the artists Hans Arp and Theo van Doesburg, the dealer and collector Herbert von Garvens, and the director of Der Sturm, Herwarth Walden. In the twenties, Schwitters had a short-lived but intense exchange with Walter Borgius, who wrote books on anarchism and education and who shared his passion for phonetics and typography. Borgius had devised a new system for representing numerals, while Schwitters speculates on a scheme that would reduce verbal clusters like *sch* to a single letter. Eventually their discussions faltered, and Schwitters decided that a joint publication would not work. A more promising collaboration was with the Berlin Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, with whom a boisterous correspondence ensued when contact was fortuitously renewed in 1946. The two began work on *PIN*, a joint publication designed to introduce art and abstract poetry to a new generation. Sadly, the project foundered when the London surrealist and publisher E. L. T. Mesens ruled that their work was twenty-five years out of date.

The letters from exile are the most revealing of Schwitters's emotions. Written to his wife Helma and other friends in Hanover, or to more distant friends such as Katherine Dreier, they voice a string of complaints, such as trying in vain to get a Norwegian passport, along with a growing melancholy regarding his enforced displacement, and his despair at ever finding an appreciative audience in Norway. One short letter to Dreier sent from Lysaker sounds the depths of depression: "All in all, life is so horrible that one would prefer not to have been born." (Nündel, p. 139) A rare moment of joy is recorded in a letter of May 1939 to Nelly van Doesburg (whose husband had died in 1931). Schwitters describes sitting with Helma on the veranda of the Hjertøya hut in the sun, and enjoying the scenery of meadows, sea, mountain snow, and cherry blossom. (Nündel, p. 151) This proved to be Helma's last visit. When he writes to her at Christmas that year, the war having now begun, he boasts of maintaining morale by gazing at his old works—all "outstanding masterpieces." (Nündel, p. 155) The worsening political situation stimulates erratic thoughts, voiced in a letter of February 1940 to his old friend Kate T. Steinitz, of escaping to Haiti or to the United States. He adds dark comments on his inability to find buyers for his art and resolves to give up sending works out to dealers: "I'd rather sell nothing, I'd rather starve. The world ought soon to know who I am. And if not, then I don't give a damn." (Nündel, p. 160)

128 *Mz 26.45. Sch.*, 1925–26

After the flight from Norway, letters to Helma record his prison routine on the Isle of Man, detailing his diet, his blurred vision, his intensive artmaking. Later, he writes from London, and in 1942, tells her of a holiday in the Lake District, alluding to walks in the mountains, landscape painting, and rain, and confiding that "it's like Norway, only more romantic." (Nündel, p. 174) Edith Tschichold, wife of the typographer Jan Tschichold, who was by now living in Switzerland, attempted to relay letters between Kurt and Helma,

but wartime circumstances soon put an end to further exchange of correspondence between the two.

In December 1944, Schwitters learned of Helma's death from cancer thanks to a telegram sent by Marguerite Hagenbach, Arp's second wife. The loss was compounded by the subsequent news of the 1943 bombing of the original *Merzbau*. Letters to his old friends Christof and Luise Spengemann (who had spent several years in Nazi prisons) express his *idée fixe* of getting to Hanover to sort out the remnants, the fact of total obliteration being unthinkable. As late as September 1946, Schwitters is still talking about visiting Hanover to retrieve the surviving fragments and forward them to New York for his show at the Museum of Modern Art. (Nündel, p. 230) The correspondence with the Spengemanns peters out in October 1947, amid pathetic references to fading energy, to spitting blood black as ink, and to being able to work on the *Merz Barn* for only three hours a day. He estimates that he will need three years to complete the work. (Nündel, pp. 284, 286) Three months later, Schwitters was dead. As he once grimly observed: "Wir spielen, bis uns der Tod abholt" (We're just playing till death comes to fetch us). (Nündel, p. 210)

1 The extracts given here are translated by the authors from the original text in Lach 1, pp. 58–59.

2 The poem has been translated many times. There exists a volume comprising no less than 154 translations from languages around the world: Gerd Weiberg, Klaus Stadtmüller, and Dietrich zur Nedden, eds., *A-----N-----N-----A!* (Lüneburg, 2000).

3 See Leonard Forster, *Poetry of Significant Nonsense* (Cambridge, 1962).

4 "erklärungen zu meiner ursonate" (1932), Lach 1, p. 312, translated in Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, eds., *Kurt Schwitters: poems performances pieces proses [sic] plays poetics* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 233–37.

5 Klaus Hinrichsen, "19, Hutchinson Square, Douglas, Isle of Man," in Michael Erlhoff and Klaus Stadtmüller, eds., *Kurt Schwitters Almanach*, vols. 1–10 (Hanover, 1982–91), vol. 8, 1989, p. 109. Translated in David Cesarani and Tony Kuschner, eds., *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 1993), p. 196.

6 Rothenberg and Joris 1993 (see note 4), p. 219.

7 Stefan Themerson, *Kurt Schwitters in England* (London, 1958), pp. 135–36.

8 Quoted in Gwendolen Webster, *Kurt Merz Schwitters* (Cardiff, 1997), p. 316.

9 "Die Familiengruft," Lach 4, pp. 308–20, translated in Rothenberg and Joris 1993 (see note 4), pp. 197–208.

10 The fairy tales of Kurt Schwitters have been translated as *Lucky Hans and Other Merz Fairy Tales*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton NJ, 2009).

11 *Auguste Bolte* came out under the imprint of *Der Sturm* as an independent slim volume in 1922 (albeit bearing the date 1923). A full English rendering appears in Rothenberg and Joris 1993 (see note 4), pp. 137–64.

12 A business letter addressed by Schwitters to a potential reader tells him that *Augusta Bolte* is Schwitters's best literary work and recommends that he read it carefully and in its entirety if he wishes to discern the deeper philosophy hidden therein. See undated letter in *Kurt Schwitters. 1887–1948*, exh. cat., 2nd ed. (Hanover, 1987), p. 60.

13 Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters* (Cologne, 1967; reprint Munich, 1984), p. 242.

14 Kurt Schwitters, *Wir spielen, bis uns der Tod abholt: Briefe aus fünf Jahrzehnten*, ed. Ernst Nündel (Frankfurt am Rhein, Berlin, and Vienna, 1974).

The Designer

The *Merz* Journals

In 1923, as the aftershocks of the Great War rumbled through Germany, the country teetered on the verge of civil war. Inflation spun out of control, the French occupied the Ruhr—Germany's industrial powerhouse—and a succession of riots and revolts ended with a failed putsch in Munich and the arrest of its leader, Adolf Hitler. Yet pioneering developments were also under way in industry, technology, communications, and transport, along with the advent of radical new directions in the arts and design. By the end of 1923, Germany was ready to take its place on the international stage.

The year's volatile mixture of breakdown and upsurge was summed up by Schwitters in the first issue of his *Merz* magazine, where his recent Holland Dada tour was provocatively linked with the calamitous political situation:

> Our appearance in Holland was like a huge, outrageous victory parade. At the same time as the French were occupying the Ruhr with guns and tanks, we were occupying the art world of Holland with Dada . . . While the French encountered enormous resistance in the Ruhr, Dada encountered none in Holland. (Lach 5, p. 131)

Merz 1 was modeled on the third issue of the Zurich Dada journal, published in 1918, whose content was set out in the kind of potpourri of layouts and typefaces pioneered by Futurist publications. Similar typographical experiments featured in Hausmann's *Der Dada* (1919–20), Van Doesburg's *Mécano* (1922–23), and, to a lesser extent, in a spate of Constructivist publications of the twenties, many of which included contributions by Schwitters. Wherever they originated—Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, The Netherlands—such journals were addressed to an international readership and were of inestimable value to the avant-garde community, providing a forum whereby they could distribute their work on a broad scale. Most, however, were short-lived compared with *Merz*, which survived for nearly a decade, though its financing was never more than precarious.

Merz was launched under the imprint of the Merz publishing house, based in Schwitters's apartment in Hanover, with Schwitters himself acting as publisher, editor, typographer, and chief contributor. *Merz* provided him with a vehicle for self-advertisement, an outlet for his social and political views, and a means of establishing himself within the international avant garde. Its twenty-one issues thus cover a wide range of his activities from 1923 to 1932. Early numbers were multilingual and advertised other European and American avant-garde journals, and Schwitters expected reciprocal treatment from their editors. If his claim in *Merz 1. Holland Dada* that its texts were available in any language was wildly exaggerated, his extant address books show, as his friend and colleague Kate Steinitz noted, that *Merz* not only fulfilled his need for an area of exchange, but also brought Schwitters—and with him Hanover—into the center of contemporary developments in the international art world.[1]

In *Merz*, Schwitters extended the boundaries of a literary periodical to their utmost—if it can be termed a periodical at all, as it appeared at irregular intervals, and not always in textual form. At first it served mainly to define his one-man art movement within an avant-garde framework, pitching it somewhere between Dada and Constructivism. This was more than just a balancing act between anarchy and utopia, for Schwitters, like Van Doesburg—a main contributor to early issues of *Merz*—saw in Dada a means of liberation from the socio-political values that had resulted in a horrific world war, a form of negation that could free the mind for the fresh perceptions and perspectives of a rational, coherent culture. As the Dada movement had by 1923 virtually disintegrated, such aspects of *Merz* are best seen as a post-Dada phenomenon, a retrospective application of Dada in the service of reform. Schwitters accordingly added a political dimension to *Merz 2. nummer i*; its "War Section" included his pacifist message that "There is no human right that could force people to wage war against each other." In addition, *Merz 2* contained a joint manifesto, *Manifest Proletkunst*, whose signatories (including Schwitters, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, and Theo van Doesburg) affirmed the role of the artist as reformer but rejected the idea that art could be tied to any class or political dogma. For all the association of Merz with social betterment, *Merz 2* also introduced Schwitters's new invention of i-art, which, as he described it, was clearly an instance of 'art for art's sake.' It was a variant of the original idea of Merz, which stated

DIE GUTE REKLAME IST BILLIG.

Ein geringes Maß hochwertiger Reklame, die in jeder Weise Qualität verrät, übersteigt an Wirkung eine vielfache Menge ungeeigneter, ungeschickt organisierter Reklame.
Max Burchartz.

MERZ 11

TYPO RE KLA ME

EINIGE THESEN ZUR GESTALTUNG DER REKLAME VON MAX BURCHARTZ:

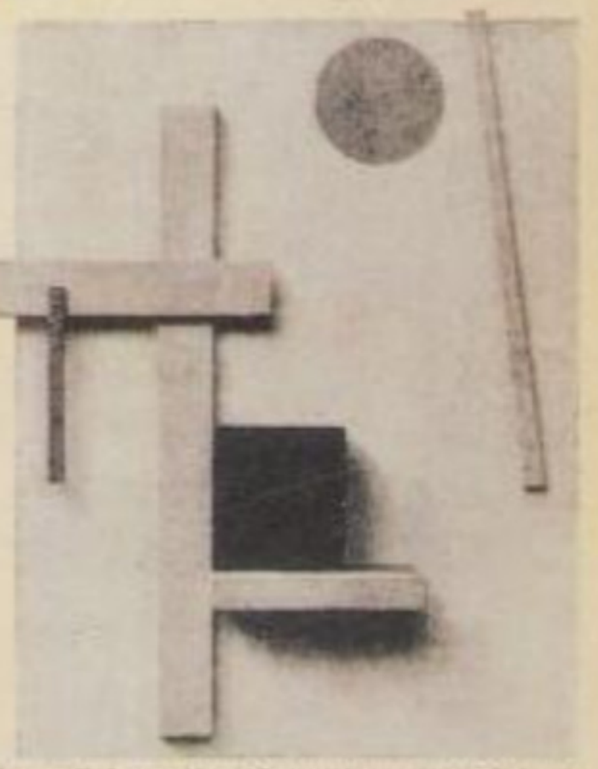
Die Reklame ist die Handschrift des Unternehmers. Wie die Handschrift ihren Urheber, so verrät die Reklame Art, Kraft und Fähigkeit einer Unternehmung. Das Maß der Leistungsfähigkeit, Qualitätspflege, Solidität, Energie und Großzügigkeit eines Unternehmens spiegelt sich in Sachlichkeit, Klarheit, Form und Umfang seiner Reklame. Hochwertige Qualität der Ware ist erste Bedingung des Erfolges. Die zweite: Geeignete Absatzorganisation; deren unentbehrlicher Faktor ist gute Reklame. Die gute Reklame verwendet moderne Mittel. Wer reist heute in einer Kutsche? Gute Reklame bedient sich neuester zweckgemäßer Erfindungen als neuer Werkzeuge der Mitteilung. Wesentlich ist die Neuartigkeit der Formengebung. Abgeleierte banale Formen der Sprache und künstlerischen Gestaltung müssen vermieden werden.

Zitiert aus Gestaltung der Reklame, Bochum, Bongardstrasse 15

K. SCHWITTERS. Signalentwurf für Adolf Rothenberg

DIE GUTE REKLAME
ist sachlich, ist klar und knapp, verwendet moderne Mittel, hat Schlagkraft der Form, ist billig.
MAX BURCHARTZ.

WERBEN SIE BITTE FÜR MERZ. Pelikan-Nummer.



Merzrelief von Kurt Schwitters siehe Seite 91

RED. MERZ, HANNOVER, WALDHAUSENSTR. 5II.

129 *Merz* 11. *Typoreklame* (so-called "Pelikan number"), p. 90, November 1924

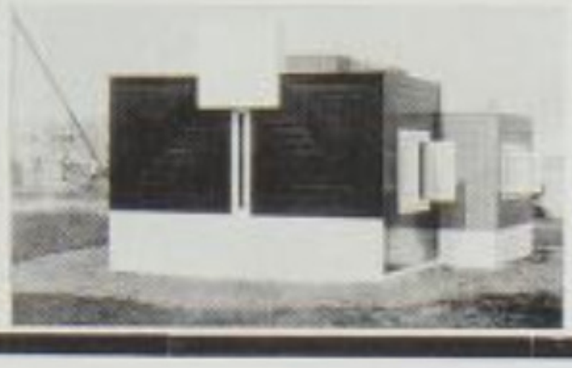
130 *Merz 4. Banalities*, p. 38, July 1923

that the significance of art lies in the bounded composition. Schwitters's 'i' pictures generally consist of misprints cut out and framed, so that—as he explained—idea, material, and artwork are identical; rather than creating content, the artist selects as a photographer would.

Two issues of *Merz* consisted of visual material only. *MERZ 3. MERZPORTFOLIO, FIRST PORTFOLIO OF THE MERZ VERLAG. 6 Lithographs* (fig. 87) was a portfolio of Schwitters's lithographs; *Merz 5. 7 Arpaden*, contained works by Hans Arp. The six striking lithographs of *Merz 3* were composed from refuse from a commercial printing works—a workplace where images and text are broken down and reassembled. They display numerous marks that would be removed from a finished product, and are illustrative of Schwitters's enduring interest in the process per se. *Merz 4. Banalities* (figs. 127, 130) further explored the interactions between Merz, Dada, and Constructivism, with special emphasis on blurring distinctions between text, typography, and image. *Merz 6. Imitatoren Watch Step!*—to be read from the front and from the back—inclined towards Constructivism, with an essay by Mondrian and reproductions of work by Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky, while *Merz 7. Tapsheft*, the first issue of 1924, returned to a focus on Dada. Its new quarto format, with eight instead of sixteen pages, indicated that it was time to move on, and indeed the back page announced that the next double number, *Merz 8/9*, was to be entitled *Nasci*—that is, birth or becoming.

While recalling the emphasis on process in *Merz 3*, *Merz 8/9. Nasci* (fig. 132) changed the face of *Merz* entirely. Co-edited with Lissitzky, it appeared in mid-1924 and took as its sole theme the search for elemental forms with which to build a new society, a recurring topic of avant-garde journals of the twenties. With its insistence that art should present, not represent, and its analogies between natural and manmade forms, *Merz 8/9. Nasci* heralded a new understanding of the relationship between nature and technology. Hitherto, the pages of *Merz* had been crammed with texts and pictures; in *Merz 8/9. Nasci*, space was a key element of the layout, taking up more than half of many pages. In a wider sense, this issue also gave Schwitters a breathing space to review his status within the avant garde. From now on, he discarded the Merz-Dada-Constructivism constellation and devoted each issue of *Merz* to a single topic.

131 *Merz 20. Kurt Schwitters. Katalog* (Catalogue of the *Great Merz Exhibition*), 1927

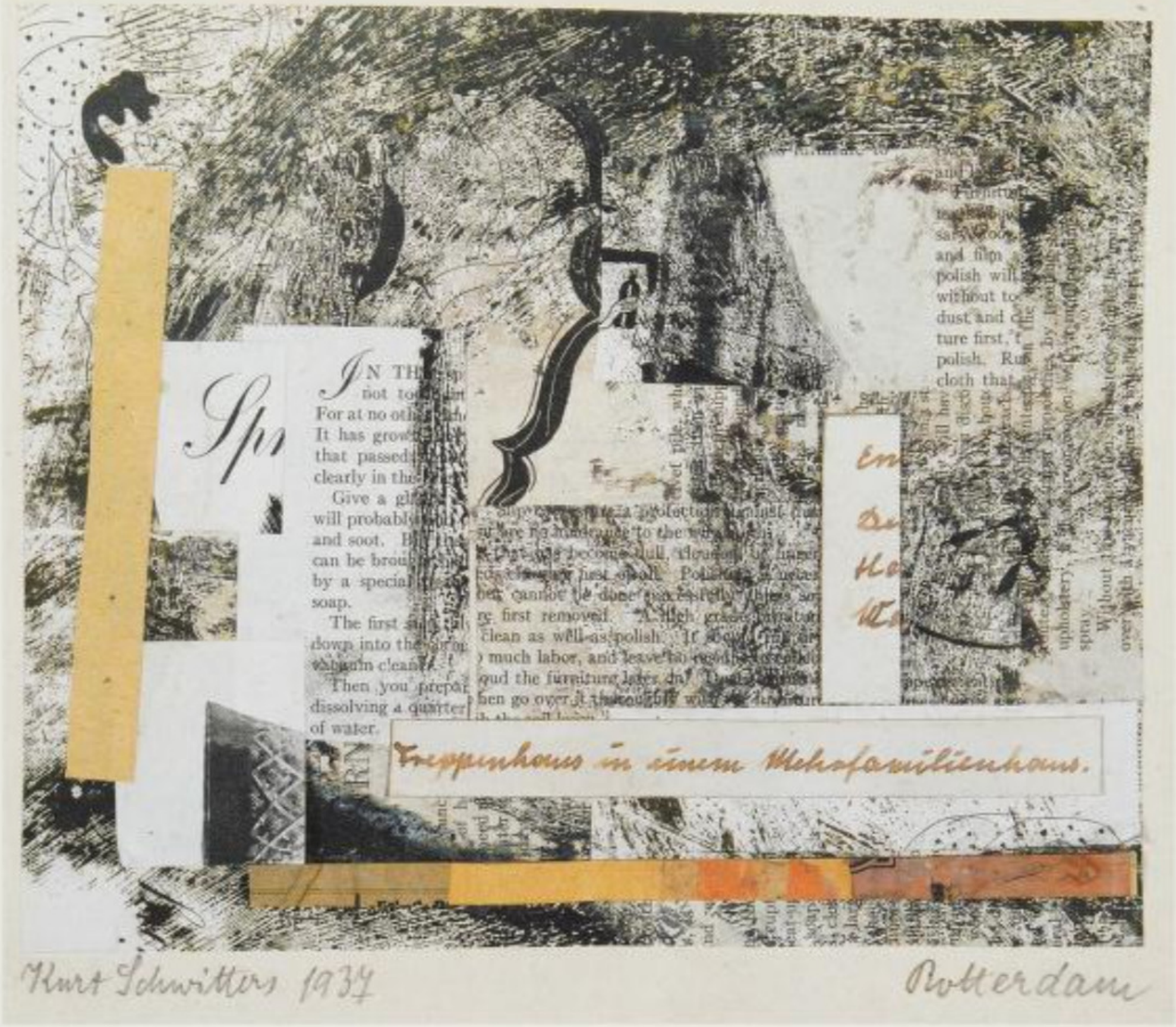


132 Kurt Schwitters and El Lissitzky, *Merz 8/9. Nasci*, pp. 81–82, April / July 1924

The production of *Merz 8/9. Nasci* was fraught with difficulties, not least because Lissitzky contracted tuberculosis at this time. *Merz 10*, announced as a Bauhaus book, also ran into problems; it never appeared, perhaps because of the Bauhaus's enforced departure from Weimar, and only a few drafts remain. In *Merz 11. Typoreklame. Pelikan-Nummer* (fig. 129), Schwitters outlined the basics of effective typography, with examples of his own work. He plainly intended to expand on the theme of commercial art, for *Merz 11* referred to forthcoming special issues on advertising, design, and packaging. None of these materialized and instead Schwitters continued to display his typographical skills in *Merz 12*, *Merz 14/15*, and *Merz 16/17*, all fairy tales written in collaboration with Kate Steinitz. Van Doesburg also worked on *Merz 14/15. Die Scheuche. Ein Märchen*, with illustrations made up of typographical elements (fig. 125). *Merz 13. Merz-Grammophonplatte*, in contrast, was a gramophone record with Schwitters reciting part of the *Ursonate*.

From 1926 to 1932, *Merz* appeared only sporadically. In 1926, Schwitters issued Ludwig Hilbersheimer's *Grossstadtbauten*, a booklet on futuristic city architecture, as *Merz 18/19. Merz 20. Kurt Schwitters Katalog* (fig. 131), portraying an unusually suave Schwitters on the cover, served as the catalogue of the 1927 Merz exhibition that toured various towns including Dresden, Frankfurt, and Cologne. *Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft*, published in 1931, was an elegant miscellany of Schwitters's literary work in landscape format. In the afterword, he broached the problems of the artist at this time of severe political and social crisis and indicated that he wished to retire from public life. Neither *Merz 22. Entwicklung* nor *Merz 23. e.E.* advanced further than the planning stage, though possibly they would have revealed more about the studio columns, already mentioned in *Merz 21*, to which he was devoting himself so energetically at this time. *Merz 24. Ursonate* of 1932 was not only the final issue, but Schwitters's final publication. It contained the full text of his most self-contained work, the *Ursonate*, with typography by Jan Tchischold (fig. 122).

From start to finish, *Merz* articulated the role of the Weimar avant garde as no other journal of its time, giving some credence to Schwitters's remark in *Merz 21. erstes Veilchenheft* that he represented his age far more than any politician. The first issues, packed with literary and visual entries, soon gave way to the neater, often co-edited booklets of the mid-decade, when artist networks were more firmly established and even making inroads into social reform. The final numbers, devoted solely to Schwitters's own work (and some never realized) reflected the collapse of Germany's avant garde and the end of their cooperative commitment to social change.



133 *Rotterdam*, 1937

Typography and Graphic Design

In late 1929, the Bund für deutsche Schrift (Association for German Script) wrote to Hanover town council, alleging that their typographer was using a typeface that jeopardized Germany's time-honored cultural values. The typeface in question was Paul Renner's brand-new Futura, and the typographer under fire was Kurt Schwitters.[2]

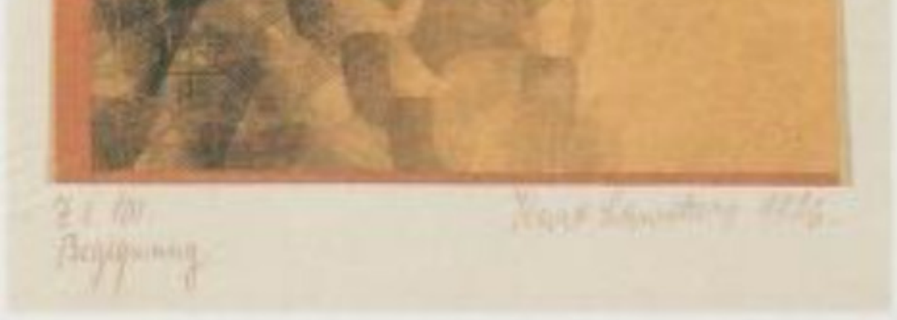
Municipalities in Germany had begun the process of rationalizing office technology in 1922, when the engineer Walter Porstmann introduced the paper sizes that are now an international norm (ISO 216). In January 1929, Hanover municipality contracted Schwitters to redesign their printed matter in line with new standards, and became so proud of his work that they sent it to major typography exhibitions. Futura was later to become one of the century's most successful typefaces and has retained its popularity until today (fig. 134).

There might seem a world of difference between the audacious Merz artist of 1919 and the established graphic designer serving the community in 1929, but as the letter cited above shows, in the eyes of the conservatives, Schwitters was still regarded as a seditious figure. When in 1931 the French politician Pierre Viénot published a study of the Weimar Republic's current crisis, he concluded that nothing could escape political connotations in Germany's polarized environment, and printer's type was no exception.[3] Print was a significant factor in the avant-garde revolt against the bourgeoisie, for as a material it defied all the conventions of institutionalized art. As an impersonal, cheap, easily available, and often ephemeral machine-made product, whose usage demanded only scissors and glue, its mere presence in a picture provided an ironical or absurd commentary on the common understanding of art. It could also serve as critique; one wonders how many upstanding burghers were horror-struck by works such as *Untitled (With Red 4)* (fig. 83), which made a mockery of that sacred cow of officialdom, the rubber stamp.

From the first, print had been a mainstay of Merz, even providing the source of the term, and Schwitters's abstracts display a wide selection of the printed matter of his age. But unlike the clippings in other avant-garde works, Merz print generally consisted of torn, crumpled, or damaged refuse, or (as with the i-drawings) printer's rejects. To a point we can accept the artist's claims that

these were simply compositional elements of abstract works, but their content is often too obvious, and sometimes too politically orientated, to overlook. The grubby cuttings of *Rotterdam* (fig. 133) admonish us with cleaning instructions, *Z i 101. Encounter.* (fig. 135) is patently a (ready-made) echo of Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (Nude Descending a Staircase), and one collage of 1930 includes an almost complete article about Hitler (fig. 136). In England, Schwitters's typographical elements became even more specific (figs. 49, 114).

Merz was more than just a passive container for letters and words; like many of his colleagues, Schwitters sought ways of giving language new life and meaning. The medium of print became the message of innovation: he experimented with poems and pictures consisting of letters and numbers (fig. 121); some of his *Tran*



135 *Z i 101. Encounter.*, 1926

texts, directed against his critics, instantly assault the reader with startling layouts and typefaces; and the typography of his journal *Merz* was more constantly inventive than that of any other contemporary avant-garde publication. *Merz 11* was devoted to graphic design, and in *Merz 14/15* (fig. 125) Doesburg and Schwitters created pictures from typographical elements. The idea, gleaned from Lissitzky, was here realized more imaginatively, so that in parts it is difficult to distinguish between plot, typeface and image. *Merz 24. Ursonate* (fig. 122) and Schwitters's notebooks (fig. 88), guest book entries (fig. 137), and collaged postcards (fig. 45) provide further examples of his diverse use of print.

After working with Lissitzky on advertising copy for the Hanover firm of Pelikan, Schwitters launched his Merz Werbe graphic design agency in late 1924. His wartime experience as a draftsman no doubt contributed to its rapid success, but the New Typography required far more than craftsmanship; as the reproduction of one of his reliefs in *Merz 11* indicated, the impact of abstract art was increasingly evident in contemporary graphic design (fig. 129). With the

134 Theater poster promoting subscription tickets for Städtische Bühnen Hannover (Hanover civic theater), 1930

136 *You Should Beware of Hot Air*, 1930–31

advent of simplified typefaces and standardized paper sizes in Germany, companies had begun to employ trained artists as commercial designers, while museums exhibited the latest typographical styles. The display of Schwitters's typography in Lissitzky's famous *Abstraktenkabinett* in Hanover was labeled "The effect of abstract art on everyday life," and most members of the international ring neuer werbegestalter (Circle of New Advertising Designers), founded by Schwitters in 1927, were artists-turned-typographers. In 1929, the year Schwitters began standardizing Hanover town council's printed matter, he was entrusted with the promotional graphics of the Dammerstock housing estate in Karlsruhe (fig. 138). His logo, a stylized form of the ground plan, appeared on the poster and catalogue cover and can still be seen today on the estate's heating plant. He was well aware of the impact of corporate identity and had already designed logos for Merz and for Merz Werbe—the former, in homage to Malevich, in the form of a black square.

By the late twenties, Schwitters was producing several hundred designs a year (including one for the Hildesheim museum where his Merz exhibition had caused outrage in 1922). Following the latest trends, he wrote articles and lectured on the New Typography, invented his own typeface, and published his ideas for a systematic reform of the German language. His theories attracted radicals such as the prominent anarchist Walter Borgius and the Marxist-leaning architect Bodo Rasch, who in 1930 co-authored *Gefesselter Blick* (Captured Glance), a key publication on new graphic design. Schwitters's designs were given prominence both in the book and in the eponymous exhibition, for which he acted as a consultant. The members of the ring neuer werbegestalter were all represented in the pages of *Gefesselter Blick*, among them Jan Tschichold, a young German typographer who had emerged as a pioneer in the field. In 1928, Tschichold included examples of Schwitters's designs in his seminal handbook *Die neue Typographie*.

During the brief existence of the ring, Schwitters remained its driving force, setting it up as a forum and organizing contributions to exhibitions at home and abroad. Its members shared a common interest in stripping art of elitism and establishing new principles of efficient design, believing that if all forms of visual information were simplified, people would be better able to orient themselves in a rapidly changing industrialized society. The ring have since been accused of betraying the avant garde by producing commercial designs in service of a capitalist society and thus upholding the status quo. If they had indeed brought stability to the republic, history might have taken a different course, but they never shook off the charge that they were subversive and "unGerman." Pelikan soon replaced the designs of Schwitters and Lissitzky with more cautious advertising, and when in 1931 Schwitters published his view of the political crisis, he wrote that the work of the avant garde had hardly dented society; their hopes of intervening in everyday life had proven illusory. (Lach 5, pp. 340–48) The New Typography

137 *Untitled (HIGH LIGHT)*, from Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart's visitors' book, vol. 2, sheet 6 recto, February 15, 1930, and October 2, 1933

138 Catalogue cover for the exhibition *Karlsruhe Dammerstock-Siedlung, Die Gebrauchswohnung*, Karlsruhe, 1929

remained a faint hope, but not for long. Tschichold offered him a lectureship at the German Master Printers' School in Munich but was himself dismissed from his post in 1933 and imprisoned on account of his "Bolshevist typography"; like most of the ring, his future lay in exile, much to the benefit of British typography practices. Schwitters's four years of intense effort for Hanover municipality were undone in June 1933 when the new regime ordered the use of the dense Gothic script and symmetrical layouts supposedly in keeping with the German character. (Hitler revoked the decision in 1941, declaring Gothic a "Jewish" typeface.)

The mechanical aspects of typography spilled over into Merz after 1931 when Schwitters experimented briefly with multiples.[4] Well before this, he had begun to use fragments of his own graphic designs in his collages, at once robbing them of their raison d'être and revaluing them as parts of a Merz picture. In the masterfully Kafkaesque *Untitled (Official Matter Liable to Postal Charges)* (fig. 139), a stylized clover leaf—the Hanover council logo—complements three roughly cut printed elements (of his own design) and three snippets of photographs depicting a waterfall, a wooden door, and a tilted birch wood, all clearly glued to a blank page. In his choice and treatment of these scrappy but arresting images, Schwitters intentionally generates a friction between the finished artwork and the world from which his materials stem. Despite his insistence that "A picture is a self-contained work of art. It refers to nothing outside itself. . . . A consistent work of art must be abstract" (Lach 5, p. 134), he was equally concerned to emphasize that "art cannot tolerate any bounds." (Lach 5, p. 238) The definition of Merz was always fuzzy, and the very name *Merz Werbe* suggests that he saw his agency as an extension of Merz. The new graphic design he promoted was an expression of the climate of reform and as such, presented a threat to the old hierarchies, as those who lashed out at his typographical work saw all too well. If Schwitters doggedly resisted all interpretations of his art during the twenties, it was because its egalitarian subtext was even more radical. The price for maintaining the resolutely uncompromising democracy of Merz was that (like any democracy), it has always been assailable from every side. As Werner Schmalenbach noted: "in spite of his noisy insistence on a pure artistic standpoint, his art was not unfolded in the shelter of aesthetic insularity but in an extremely vulnerable sphere of his own making."[5]

139 *Untitled (OFFICIAL MATTER, LIABLE TO POSTAL CHARGES)*, 1931–32

> Schwitters, though not a practicing architect, knew more about architectural design than many a professional. It was a pleasure to hear his discussions with Gropius, Hilbersheimer, Haesler and many others: he always hit the nail on the head.[6]

Kurt Schwitters was respected as a knowledgeable and perceptive colleague by many of the Weimar Republic's pioneering architects, though his architectural training was confined to two semesters in 1918. He had little incentive to pursue his studies, for there was no money for building projects in Germany's overcrowded cities. The acute housing shortage impinged on his own life in 1921 when his parents had to give up three rooms of their apartment (one of them evidently his studio) to a family with two young children for over five and a half years.

If Germany's avant-garde architects had to content themselves with fantasy projects after the war, a bright future beckoned. The socialist architect Bruno Taut spoke for all when he proclaimed grandly in 1918 that "Everything will be one thing: architecture."[7] Taut envisioned the new architecture as incorporating the whole field of visual and applied art, rendering distinctions between architecture, interior design, painting, and sculpture meaningless; artistic innovation was to be absorbed into a wider movement to construct a framework for a new democratic society. Schwitters's interest in the new architecture was thus not a sideline, but integral to the avant garde's perception of themselves as social reformers.

Taut published Schwitters's work in his journal *Frühlicht* (Daybreak) and unhesitatingly assigned him a place in the great tradition of European art, though reckoned that only a later generation would appreciate him. Praise for Merz also came from Taut's Gläserne Kette [Glass or Crystal Chain] architect group. At this time, for lack of architectural contracts, the Gläserne Kette were sketching utopian designs on paper and making models to inspire new architectural concepts. Schwitters's first experiments in Merz architecture were likewise aimed at stimulating the architect's imagination, but through the material object. In 1920 he began to construct freestanding assemblages that, as he explained, were not architectural scale models but explorations of materials and methods. The tiny *Haus Merz* (Merz House, fig. 140) was clearly not fashioned from the customary clay or plaster, but assembled from unmalleable found objects: a button, a spinning top, cog wheels, and scraps of cheap board.

In 1922 Schwitters wrote that of all the arts, architecture was the most attuned to Merz. It was a defining moment, for with this statement he ventured outside the sphere of the gallery, museum, theater, and literary journal into the challenging field of urban development. His first encounter with the new architecture occurred during the Dada Holland tour, when he met leading Dutch architects and encountered the kind of functional housing lacking in Germany, and from this time onwards, he became a staunch advocate of the New Building.

It was not until the end of the inflation crisis that socialist municipalities in Germany were able to commission standardized, hygienic, low-budget accommodation for workers. Schwitters's response was to plan a series of publications on avant-garde architecture, though the venture proved so costly that the first of these, Ludwig Hilbersheimer's *Grossstadtbauten*, was also the last. With undiminished enthusiasm, he continued to visit new building projects, some of which earned his special praise. One was the Gut Garkau farm near Lübeck, whose ultramodern, maverick design was described even in its own time as "organic"; Schwitters noted delightedly it was the most lopsided building he'd ever seen. From 1928, he was directly involved in high-profile schemes such as the Dammerstock estate in Karlsruhe (fig. 138) and the cumbersomely named Reichsforschungsgesellschaft für Wirtschaftlichkeit im Bau- und Wohnungswesen, an official body charged with the research and development of efficient building technologies.

However exploratory *Haus Merz* may have been, it was also restrictive in that its elements consisted of found objects. In his essay on Merz architecture, Schwitters had suggested that remnants of old buildings could be included in new designs, if not necessarily determining their final form. He persistently drew attention to what he saw as the neglect of the architectural *objet trouvé*—in other words, an edifice's relation to its environment and

140 *Merz House*, 1920

its inhabitants—though such creative syntheses of old and new were highly unfashionable. Few of his architect colleagues attempted to combine the innovative with the existing or to assimilate the built and natural environment into their ambitious projects. Even fewer were ready to admit that the residents of their pristine housing estates might not metamorphose into model people to match.

The most controversial of these estates was the Weissenhofsiedlung, opened in 1927. The powerful lobby of right-wing German architects saw red when confronted with an international style that promoted flat roofs and reinforced concrete modules, and promptly blasted Weissenhof's show houses as a sin against the Fatherland, more suited to a Jerusalem suburb than a Stuttgart hillside. Schwitters voiced his own reservations in an article on the estate, not from an opposing ideological standpoint, but with Merz architecture in mind. (Lach 5, pp. 280–86) He reserved his harshest criticism for the houses of Le Corbusier—not unexpectedly, given the gulf between his own plea for environmental awareness and Le Corbusier's plans for a clean sweep of what he termed the "dead bones" of Europe's townscapes.

After visiting Greece in 1928, Schwitters expressed distaste for what he saw as the authoritarian aspects of Greek temples, and was similarly critical of the traditionalist designs of contemporary conservative architects. He nursed a lifelong aversion to anything he perceived as overbearing and pretentious; even close colleagues were not spared, or at least those with elitist tendencies. In his Weissenhof essay, for example, Schwitters did not hesitate to pen some dry observations on Mies van der Rohe's ostentatious doorways:

> I can't imagine you can simply walk through these doors, rather you stride through them. Great noble beings stride through these doors, full of a new spirit. At least we hope so . . . It can turn out in the end that the residents aren't as mature or liberated as their own doors. We'll just have to hope that the house will make them into noble beings. (Lach 5, p. 285)

Nonetheless, it was the designs of contemporaries such as Mies and Van Doesburg that led him to conclude that the most exciting development in contemporary architecture lay in its innovative articulation of space—that is, in the creation of an interactive space that abandoned hierarchic structures and blurred distinctions between interior and exterior. It was this new experience of space as an architectural element that Schwitters emphasized when he lectured on design in art, architecture, and typography in various German towns in 1929 and 1930, and during the next two years, he used the guiding principle of "flowing space" to create the sculptural interior that came to be known as the *Merzbau*.

In 1933, the Federation of German Architects declared its solidarity with Germany's new rulers, who were already clearing urban tracts and constructing massive government buildings and parade grounds designed both as expressions and generators of national unity and power. But the Great Depression had already curbed the spread of the New Architecture, and by 1931 Schwitters's diverse activities in this field had come to an end.

1 Kate T. Steinitz, *Kurt Schwitters: a Portrait from Life* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 18.

2 Letter reproduced in Werner Heine, "Futura without a Future: Kurt Schwitters' Typography for Hanover Town Council, 1929–1934," *Journal of Design History* 7, no. 2 (1994).

3 Pierre Viénot, *Incertitudes allemandes: la crise de la civilisation bourgeoise en Allemagne* (Paris, 1931), translated as *Is Germany Finished?* (London, 1931).

4 At least two such pictures are known: *Lampenbild* (OS 1777, 1931) and *Tropfenbild* (OS 1900, 1934–36).

5 Werner Schmalenbach, "Kunst und Politik," in *Kurt Schwitters*, exh. cat. Städtische Kunsthalle (Düsseldorf, 1971), p. 6.

6 Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, "Kurt Schwitters 1887–1948," in *Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Schriften und Vorträge*, ed. Dietrich Helms (St. Gallen, 1976), p. 44.

7 Bruno Taut, *Ein Architekturprogramm* (Berlin, 1918), in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, trans. Anton Kaes, ed. Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley, 1994), p. 432.

The Legacy

Schwitters's death in a remote corner of Europe, at a time when avant-garde activities were severely curtailed and international communications remained difficult, meant that the reputation of the onetime dynamic self-publicist lapsed for some while into obscurity. Of course his friends and colleagues were appalled to hear of his demise in conditions of penury. Then, as life returned to something like normality, the Dadaists began to publish their recollections of their youthful adventures. Several memoirs refer positively to Schwitters's career and inspiring example. In May 1949, Hans Arp issued a warm tribute to his old friend, praising his Merz pictures as being "full of secrets and wisdom" and declaring grandly that Schwitters had identified the meaning of life as "the metamorphosis of the visible, palpable world toward the formless absolute."[1] In 1958, Richard Huelsenbeck penned an essay on "Dada and Existentialism," in which he refers approvingly to Schwitters's affinity with Chance (fig. 141). However, he cannot resist repeating his old jibes about the man's timorous bourgeois lifestyle and once again laments his apolitical stance as an artist.[2] Another Berlin Dadaist, Walter Mehring, remembered Schwitters in affectionate terms as a "German-romantic eccentric" who led a double life, teaching on weekdays and "Merzing" on the weekend. "He was a steadfast Dadaist, the most kindhearted and considerate of them all."[3]

In 1964, the Zurich Dadaist Hans Richter issued an anecdotal history of Dada detailing its achievements in chapters linked to the main cities that had nurtured the movement.[4] The chapter headed "Hanover Dada" praises Schwitters for the passion he brought to his many enterprises, and contributes to the Schwitters myth with apocryphal tales about the man who evicted his lodgers so as to extend the *Merzbau* to the floor above, or who would journey with bulging portfolios dangling round his torso and calmly tinker with a collage on a cold platform while waiting for a train. Richter concludes with the observation that "he did everything, and usually he did everything at the same time."[5]

Within his native land, where his work had been condemned as degenerate by the Nazi regime, Schwitters's reputation took years to recover. His writings were long out of print, and apart from stray items in anthologies and journals, they remained virtually inaccessible until the sixties; Friedhelm Lach's five-volume edition began to appear only in 1973. Yet gradually the sound-poems and pictorial poems established a devoted following among experimentalists, such as the German poets Helmut Heissenbüttel and Franz Mon, the Austrian performance-poets Ernst Jandl and Gerhard Rühm, and the Dutch sound-poet Jaap Blonk. Schwitters's innovative conception of a *Merzbühne* soliciting audience participation inspired Paul Pörtner's successful play *Scherenschnitt* (1963), which later enjoyed a thirty-year run in Boston as *Shear Madness*. The writings have since percolated across the world in piecemeal translations, with one recent compilation of the fairy tales by the folklorist Jack Zipes.

It was not until 1956 that a major retrospective, comprising over 200 works, was mounted by the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Schwitters's native Hanover. Curated by Werner Schmalenbach, who had uncovered an amazing hoard of work left behind in Lysaker, the show traveled on to Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Belgium, hastening the ascent of Schwitters's star above Europe. During 1963–64 an even larger retrospective traveled from Stockholm via Copenhagen and London to Cologne's Wallraf-Richartz Museum, whose version proudly mustered 280 pieces. Schwitters's consecration as one of Germany's foremost modernists was now assured, and endorsed by the publication in 1967 of a splendid monograph by Werner Schmalenbach, still seen as the classic study. In 2001, the Sprengel Museum in Hanover became the location of the Kurt and Ernst Schwitters Foundation; its archive houses the considerable collection of artworks, both pre- and postwar, which Schwitters's son Ernst had inherited, and which had been stored in Lysaker and Ambleside.

Within Britain, the death of a little-known refugee artist passed almost unnoticed. As leader of the English surrealist group, E. L. T. Mesens honored Schwitters's memory with a small exhibition at the London Gallery in 1950, and published a tribute to him in which he lamented the soaring prices commanded by younger artists, and praised Schwitters for his courage as "the disinterested, careless, ever poor and idealistic exponent of something which had no material value."[6] The Polish exile Stefan Themerson, who had met Schwitters in London in 1944, issued a slim volume

141 *Mz. 410. Something or Other*, 1922

of the English-language poems in 1958 under his Gabberbocchus Press imprint, prefacing it with the first extensive discussion of Schwitters the poet.[7] A few years later, in 1965, there came a small cultural stir with the news that Richard Hamilton, a pioneering Pop artist and teacher, had supervised the removal to the safety of a Newcastle museum of a weighty segment of the sculpted *Merz Barn* interior. A hiatus in British concern seems then to have ensued, for only in 1985 did London's Tate Gallery host a blockbuster retrospective. (It had originated at MoMA in New York, and later went on to the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, accompanied by an erudite and comprehensive monograph by John Elderfield.)

The major impetus fostering Schwitters's posthumous rise to fame came from America. In 1948, a small memorial show of collages opened within two weeks of his death at Rose Fried's Pinacotheca gallery in New York. A catalogue piece by Naum Gabo stated that "I know only a few in this country who realize the significance of Schwitters'[s] artistic contribution. . . . It needs a poet like Schwitters to show us that unobserved elements of beauty are strewn and spread all around us and we can find them everywhere in the portentous as well as in the insignificant, if only we care to look."[8] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., director of MoMA, had in 1936 introduced Schwitters in his epoch-making *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. When his promise of a solo show in Schwitters's lifetime was forestalled, Barr made sure to include him in the prestigious *Masters of Modern Art* of 1955. In 1951, the painter Robert Motherwell acknowledged Schwitters's importance in his anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets*. By then Schwitters's name had become an energizing watchword, invoked by many practicing artists. In 1962, William Seitz curated *The Art of Assemblage* at MoMA, showing collages by Schwitters and classic photos of the Hanover *Merzbau*. Seitz was keen to extend the show's purview to contemporary art in the Merz lineage, with such items as the metal junk sculpture of César, Alberto Burri's crude sacking-pictures, the teeming arrays of Arman and Yolande Fièvre, and the memory boxes of Joseph Cornell. Seitz also showed the elegant ensembles of Louise Nevelson, whose totemic assemblages, built of slats of wood unified by black paint, are cousin to Schwitters's Merz columns.

Since the eighties, solo shows of Schwitters's work have multiplied, and he is omnipresent in general exhibitions on Dada, ample evidence that he has long since achieved his dream of international recognition. All the same, it is noticeable that many curators shy away from his supposedly aberrant activities as a painter of landscapes, portraits, and still lifes, even though these represent a significant percentage of his output. The purely sculptural work has had less impact, although the *Merz* concept has become a touchstone for architects in search of ad hoc solutions and those needing a synonym for expressive freedom.

Schwitters's artistic legacy is largely marked by considerations of influence and affinity. Certainly there are artists such as Robert Motherwell who explicitly acknowledge Schwitters as a champion of the mundane and the overlooked, and who have produced work in keeping with his basic idiom of recycled fragments. Some creators have favored pastiche as a route to their own style; others make no avowal of indebtedness yet produce collages and assemblages in apparently the same spirit as Schwitters's pioneering originals. It seems best not to labor the notion of direct influence, which is almost always volatile, given that artists of genuine talent will always absorb more than one lesson and never remain slavishly derivative. What is needed is to detect the fresh gesture that nonetheless presupposes the "Schwitterian" precedent. It may be helpful to cite a few salient names, those of artists of whom it can be said that they cultivate areas of the cultural terrain that would be unthinkable without Schwitters's prior expeditions. It may therefore be preferable to speak of affinities and of echoes; certainly their abundance confirms Schwitters's lasting place in the Modernist pantheon.

During the fifties and sixties, a wave of activity in the arts attracted the general name of Neo-Dada, a term understood to cover a number of loosely linked trends. Turning away from the modish styles of Abstract Expressionism, American Pop artists such as Robert Rauschenberg implemented practices of appropriation, including an ingenious trick of transfering print imagery, to produce pictures and assemblages that celebrate and often ironize the imagery of mass consumerism. Jasper Johns's portrayals of single numerals promoted one of Schwitters's motifs to the status of

glamorous icon. Painters like Jim Dine and Joe Tilson executed arrays of visual motifs which are like archaeological residues of popular culture. In British Pop, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton devised brilliant screenprint images based on collage material drawn from magazine ads and American comics, while Peter Blake made paintings of cherished images from the popular press, exploiting the ambiguous thrill of bad taste. In France, the adepts of so-called Nouveau réalisme, such as Jacques Villeglé and Mimmo Rotella, appropriated tattered cinema posters and displayed them in art galleries without alteration.

The Swiss artist Jean Tinguely, who greatly admired Schwitters, created machines out of broken metal artifacts and set them into ungainly and comical motion by electricity. Another Swiss artist, Dieter Roth, created wild books and droll artifacts, often using biodegradable materials. The Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies annotated neutral matt surfaces with aimless streaks, as if challenging the expressionless to release meaning. In Italy, painters of the Arte Povera school reduced their color range and invested in unassuming textures that then threw up results of unexpected gravity. The loosely organized Fluxus artists of the sixties, among them Joseph Beuys and Wolf Vostell, projected an art of ritual and handled everyday materials in the hope of restoring contact with, and belief in, the commonplace. Edward Kienholz and George Segal built life-size installations mimicking urban structures such as bars and kiosks. Pioneer of the improvised Happening, the American assemblage artist Allan Kaprow developed unstable, proliferating environments, using rubbish ranging from dry leaves to worn automobile tires, as if to test the boundary between careless art and undisciplined reality. Recent artists such as Karsten Bott and Thomas Hirschhorn have deployed plentiful urban trash within large-scale installations that also challenge aesthetic norms.

In 2000, an exhibition opened at the Sprengel Museum in Schwitters's home town. It addressed the question of influence by setting a generous selection of his work alongside an equally large selection of work by latterday artists deemed to be working in his broad orbit.[9] It included, among other things, delicately hued pasted papers by Anne Ryan; a face fashioned from butterfly wings by Jean Dubuffet; a cluttered tabletop by Daniel Spoerri; a perfect cube formed of stacked boxes, cardboard sheets, and wood slats by Tony Cragg; and a labyrinthine interior crammed with junk orchestrated by Christoph Büchel and reachable only by crawling over a mattress and through a hole. The juxtaposition of such works with Schwitters's originals highlighted the signals and invitations that he regularly secreted within his creations. Among these may be listed his emphasis on lowly materials, his gentle joy in incongruity, and his unabashed appropriation of imagery by other hands.[10] The sheer fertility of Merz teaches us that within proliferation and diversity there lurk intensity, passion, and sometimes panic—unpredictable and often dissonant factors, yet all crucial to the adventure of artmaking.

1 Jean [Hans] Arp, "Kurt Schwitters," in *Arp on Arp: Poems, Essays, Memories*, ed. Marcel Jean (New York, 1972), pp. 251–52.

2 See Richard Huelsenbeck, "Dada und Existentialism," in Willy Verkauf, Marcel Janco, and Hans Bolliger, eds., *Dada: Monograph of a Movement* (London, 1975), pp. 35–36.

3 Walter Mehring, *Berlin Dada* (Zurich, 1959), p. 162.

4 Hans Richter, *Dada: Kunst und Antikunst* (Cologne, 1964); translated as Dada: *Art and Anti-Art* (London, 1965), p. 137ff.

5 Richter 1965 (see note 4), p. 151.

6 E. L. T. Mesens, "A Tribute to Kurt Schwitters," in *Art News and Review* 10, no. 19 (October 11, 1958).

7 Stefan Themerson, *Kurt Schwitters in England* (London, 1958).

8 Naum Gabo, "Introduction," *Kurt Schwitters in the USA*, exh. cat., Pinacotheca Gallery (New York, 1948).

9 See *In the Beginning was Merz: From Kurt Schwitters to the Present Day*, Susanne Meyer-Büser and Karin Orchard, eds., exh. cat. Sprengel Museum (Hanover, 2000).

10 For a detailed review of contemporary art practices involving the recycling of imagery by other hands, see David Evans, *Appropriation* (Cambridge, MT, 2009).

142 *EN MORN*, 1947

List of Illustrations

OS refers to entries in the Kurt Schwitters Catalogue Raisonné. (See Abbreviations, p. 6) Typographical works catalogued in *Typographie kann unter Umständen Kunst sein, Kurt Schwitters, Typographie und Werbegestaltung* (Wiesbaden 1990) are listed as "Wiesbaden 1990" plus catalogue number.

Frontispiece *Symphony for a poet*, 1940
Assemblage. Oil, feather, stone, snail shell, leather? metal? paper? on wood, nailed, 30.5 × 19.5 cm
Whereabouts unknown
OS 2617

Cover *Merzbild P. rosa*, 1930
Merz Picture P. Pink
Assemblage. Oil, pasteboard, fabric, and wood on wood, nailed, 50 × 39.4 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the collection of the NORD/LB in the Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Hanover
OS 1650

1 *Ohne Titel (Mit frühem Porträt von Kurt Schwitters)*, 1937–38
Untitled (With an Early Portrait of Kurt Schwitters)
Collage. Paper, tissue paper, cardboard on pasteboard, 22.7 × 18.1 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 2262

2 *Merzbild 9b das grosse Ichbild / Merzbild K 7*, 1919
Merz Picture 9 b The Great I Picture / Merz Picture K 7
Collage. Oil, gouache, paper, cardboard on cardboard, 96.8 × 70 cm
Museum Ludwig, Sammlung Ludwig, Cologne (loan)
OS 430

3 *Ohne Titel (Porträt Helma Schwitters)*, 1916
Untitled (Portrait of Helma Schwitters)
Oil on canvas, 45 × 38.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 153

4 Herwarth Walden, around 1918
Photographer: Nicola Perscheid
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz

5 *I. Merzbild L3 (Das Merzbild.)*, 1919
I. Merz Picture L3 (The Merz Picture.)
Assemblage. Oil, paper, wire netting, barbed wire?, metal and string on wood?, nailed, dimensions unknown
Whereabouts unknown
OS 436

6 Eduard Schwitters, around 1924
Photographer unknown
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

7 *Ohne Titel (Porträt Eleonore Fischer)*, 1927–28
Untitled (Portrait of Eleonore Fischer)
Oil on wood, 97 × 73.5 cm
Galerie Schwarzer, Düsseldorf
OS 1506/1

8 From Kurt Schwitters's photo album *Fotos nach* 1929, page with photos dating from 1919–25
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover

9 *Untitled*, 1919
Draft of title page for *Anna Blume. Dichtungen, Die Silbergäule*, 39/40, Paul Steegemann Verlag, Hanover 1920
Watercolor and ink on paper, 21 × 14 cm
Spencer Collection, New York Public Library, New York; on loan
OS 547

10 Richard Huelsenbeck (l.) and Raoul Hausmann (r.), Prague? 1920
Photographer unknown
Berlinische Galerie, Landesmuseum

11 *Ohne Titel (Gerd Schwitters, Kopfstudie I)*, 1916
Untitled (Gerd Schwitters. Study of Head I)
Pencil on paper, 33.1 × 26 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 167

12 El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Nelly van Doesburg, Ernst Schwitters, Helma Schwitters, and Kurt Schwitters in Waldhausensstrasse, Hanover, 1922
Photographer unknown
Fondation Arp, Clamart

13 Marcel Duchamp and Katherine S. Dreier in Seville, 1929
Photographer unknown
Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, New Haven, Connecticut

14 Kate Steinitz wearing a blouse printed with the program of the Cinnabar Festival, January 1928
Photographer unknown
Kate Steinitz Collection, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington

15 *KdeE (Kathedrale des erotischen Elends, mit Freitreppe der Liebesgrotte)*, 1928
KdeE (Cathedral of Erotic Misery, with Terraced Staircase of the Love Grotto)
Installation and assemblage. Paper, photograph, pasteboard, wood, metal, plaster, stone, glass, urine, cleaning rag, lignite, gas coke, blank cartridge, pencil stubs, hurdy-gurdy and diverse materials, around 350 × 200 × 100 cm
Destroyed (1943)
OS 1199/13

16 Helma Schwitters in front of the hut on Hjertøya, around 1932
Photographer: Kurt Schwitters
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 1864/1

17 *Ohne Titel (Selbstporträt 1)*, 1936–39
Untitled, Self-Portrait 1
Oil on wood, unfinished, 66.2 × 56 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2046

18 The hut on Hjertøya (interior view), around 1937
Photograph: Ernst Schwitters
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 1864/3

19 *Ohne Titel (Verschneiter Bootssteg)*, 1937–39
Untitled (Snow-Covered Boat Landing)
Oil on plywood, 58.8 × 68 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2215

20 *Ohne Titel (Sehr dunkles Bild)*, 1940
Untitled (Very Dark Picture)
Assemblage. Oil, metal, pasteboard on wood, nailed, 47 × 38.1 cm
Timothy Baum, New York
OS 2618/1

21 *Ohne Titel (Porträt eines Internierten mit Hut*, 1940
Untitled (Portrait of an Internee with a Hat)
Pencil on cardboard, 25.4 × 20.4 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2738

22 The ruins of No. 5, Waldhausenstrasse, after 1943
Photographer unknown
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

23 *Ohne Titel (Porträt Frank Routledge)*, 1945
Untitled (Portrait of Frank Routledge)
Oil on wood, 68.8 × 55.3 cm
Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal
OS 3171

24 Kurt Schwitters, Edith Thomas/Wantee, and Bill Pierce, Elterwater, June 1947
Photographer unknown
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

25 The Merz Barn, Elterwater, 1947
Exterior view, 1953–60
250/350 × 473 × 470 cm (main room)
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Littoral Arts Trust
OS 3659/1

26 *Ohne Titel (Stillleben mit weißem Elefant oder Stillleben mit Obstschale, Rose und Elefantenstatuette)*, 1912
Untitled (Still-life with White Elephant or Still-life with Fruit Bowl, Rose, and Elephant Statuette)
Oil on canvas, 61.5 × 76 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Verein der Freunde des Kunstmuseums Hannover mit Sammlung Sprengel, Hannover (gift)
OS 37

27 *Zeichnung A 6*, 1918
Drawing A6
Collage. Fabric, paper on paper, 17.8 × 14 cm
Jedlicka Family, Switzerland
OS 287

28 *Ohne Titel (dol 333)*, ca. 1939
Untitled (dol 333)
Collage. Paper, cardboard on paper, 28.2 × 23.4 cm
Conrad and Maria Janis, Los Angeles
OS 2558

29 *Merzbild K 6 Das Huthbild*, 1919
Merz Picture K 6 The Huth Picture
Collage. Oil, paper, tissue paper, cardboard, wood on pasteboard and wood, 87 × 74 cm
Private collection
OS 438

30 *Merzbild 12b, Plan der Liebe*, 1919–23
Merz Picture 12b Plan of Love
Assemblage. Tempera, watercolor, ink, pencil, paper, tissue paper and pasteboard on pasteboard, nailed, 39.4 × 29.2 cm
Metropolitan Museum of Art, promised gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, New York
OS 1092

31 *Merzbild 21b, das Haar-Nabelbild*, 1920
Merz Picture 21b, the Hair-Navel Picture
Assemblage. Gouache, charcoal, paper, corrugated pasteboard, pasteboard, wood, cork, fabric, cotton wool, hair, sealing wax, button, metal, tissue paper on pasteboard, nailed, 91 × 72 cm
Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, Karlsruhe
OS 597

32 *Merzbild 1 B Bild mit rotem Kreuz*, 1919
Merz Picture 1 B Picture with Red Cross
Collage. Oil, gouache, paper, cardboard, canvas on pasteboard, 64.5 × 54.2 cm
Deutsche Bank Collection, Frankfurt (Main)
OS 426

33 *Merzbild 10 A / L Merzbild L4 (Konstruktion für edle Frauen)*, 1919
Merz Picture 10 A / L Merz Picture L4 (Construction for Noble Ladies)
Assemblage. Oil, watercolor, gouache, wood, metal, tin funnel, leather, cork, paper, pasteboard on pasteboard on wood, nailed, 103 × 83.4 cm
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles
OS 431

34 *Breite Schmurchel*, 1924
Broad Schmurchel
Relief. Oil, wood, metal on wood, nailed, 39 × 55 × 9 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie, Verein der Freunde der Nationalgalerie Berlin, Berlin
OS 1096

35 *Relief mit gelbem Viereck 2*, 1928
Relief with Yellow Rectangle 2
Relief. Oil, plaster, wood, metal on wood, nailed, 65 × 46.4 × 18 cm
Museum für konkrete Kunst, Sammlung Kunst + Design, Ingolstadt; on loan
OS 1529

36 *Mz. 158 Das Kotsbild*, 1920
Mz. 158 The Kots Picture
Collage. Crayon, paper on paper, 27.5 × 20.7 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 696

37 *Mz 151 Wenzel Kind Madonna mit Pferd*, 1921
Mz 151 Wenzel Child Madonna with Horse
Collage. Paper on paper, 17.2 × 12.9 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the collection of the NORD/LB in the Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Hanover
OS 799

38 *Merzz. 53. rotes bonbon.*, 1920
Merzz. 53. Red Bonbon
Collage. Watercolor, net, cardboard, paper on paper, 13 × 9.7 cm
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
OS 634

39 *Mz 167 Zarten rot und gelb.*, 1920
Mz 167 Softening Red and Yellow
Collage. Paper on paper, 18 × 14.4 cm
Private collection, Bremen
OS 702

40 *Ohne Titel (Schwarze Punkte und Viereck)*, 1927
Untitled (Black Dots and Rectangle)
Collage. Paper on paper, 18.3 × 14 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1512

41 *Merzz. 22.*, 1920
Collage. Paper, tissue paper on paper, 16.9 × 13.6 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, Katherine S. Dreier Bequest, New York
OS 621

42 *Ohne Titel (Duke's Mixture)*, 1921–22
Untitled (Duke's Mixture)
Collage. Paper, cardboard on cardboard, 10.5 × 8 cm
Whereabouts unknown
OS 921

43 *Mz 79. Herz-Klee*, 1920
Mz 79. Heart Clover
Collage. Net, threads, paper on paper, 14.5 × 11.5 cm
Private collection
OS 651

44 *Ohne Titel (Tortrtalt ac hiscann)*, 1929
Untitled (Tortrtalt ac hiscann)
Collage. Paper on paper, 10.1 × 12.3 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1606

45 *Untitled (Collaged Portrait Postcard to Walter Dexel, May 27, 1921)*, 1921
Collage. Ink and paper on cardboard, 14 × 9 cm
Whereabouts unknown
OS 914

46 *Das Bäumerbild*, 1920
The Bäumer Picture
Assemblage. Oil, paper, photograph, cardboard on pasteboard, nailed, 17.8 × 21.3 cm
Private collection, Germany
OS 606

47 *Ohne Titel (Mai 191)*, around 1920
Untitled (May 191)
Collage. Paper on paper, 21.6 × 17.3 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 732

48 *Mz 170. Leere im Raum*, 1920
Mz 170. Void in Space
Collage. Paint, fabric, net, paper on paper, 18 × 14.4 cm
Private collection, Hamburg
OS 705

49 *Ohne Titel (The Hitler Gang)*, 1944
Untitled (The Hitler Gang)
Collage. Oil, canvas, cardboard, paper on paper, 34.8 × 24.6 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 3086

50 *Mz 231 Miss Blanche.*, 1923
Collage. Paper on paper, 15.6 × 12.5 cm
Private collection, Düsseldorf
OS 1114

51 *Mz 601*, 1923
Collage. Paint, leaf, paper on cardboard, 40.4 × 34.8 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1116

52 *Abstraktion Nr. II (die Gewalten)*, 1917
Abstraction No. II (The Forces)
Oil on pasteboard, 69.8 × 49.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 177

53 *Z 91 Landschaft*, 1918
Z 91 Landscape
Charcoal on paper, 14.3 × 19.4 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 338

54 *MERZ 1926, 8, Verschobene Flächen*, 1926
MERZ 1926, 8, Shifted Planes
Oil on canvas, 80 × 65.5 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie, Stiftung Sammlung Heinrich Evert, Berlin
OS 1348

55 *Mz 252. Farbige Quadrate.*, 1921
Mz 252. Colored Squares.
Collage. Paper on paper, 17.8 × 14.4 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, Sidney & Harriet Janis Collection, New York
OS 843

56 *Das Kreisen* (ehemals: *Weltenkreise*), 1919
Revolving (formerly Global Circles)
Assemblage. Oil, wood, metal, string, pasteboard, wool (unspun), wire, leather on canvas, nailed, 122.7 × 88.7 cm
The Museum of Modern Art, Advisory Committee Fund, New York
OS 444

57 *Der Lustgalgen*, around 1919
The Pleasure Gallows
Sculpture. Height around 51 cm.
Sculpture. Wood, metal wheel, wire, pasteboard, paper, burlap
Destroyed
OS 582

58 *Die heilige Bekümmernis*, around 1920
The Holy Affliction (St. Uncumber)
Sculpture. Tailor's dummy, wood, metal, string, thread, paper and candle, height ca. 100 cm
Destroyed
OS 768

59 *Die Herbstzeitlose*, 1926–29
Meadow Saffron
Sculpture, reconstructed on the basis of photos, 80.5 × 29.7 × 35.5 cm
Original destroyed
OS 1493

60 *Schlanke Plastik*, 1936
Slender Sculpture
Merzbau, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Photograph: Ernst Schwitters
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1199/31

61 *Madonna 1*, around 1936
Merzbau, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Sculpture. Wood, height around 60–65 cm
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1199/15

62 *Ohne Titel (Große Merzsäule)*, Hjertøya, around 1936
Untitled (Large Merz Column)
Destroyed (after 1951)
Sculpture. Wood?, metal?, plaster?, around 307 x 97 x 60 cm
Photograph: Ernst Schwitters
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 2105

63 *Ohne Titel (Kleine schwarze Säule)*, 1922–24
Untitled (Small Black Column)
Sculpture. Wood, painted, nailed, 23 × 22 × 16 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie, Verein der Freunde der Nationalgalerie, Berlin
OS 1091

64 *Ohne Titel (Bemalte Gips- und Holzform)*, 1945–47
Untitled (Painted Plaster and Wood Form)
Sculpture. Wood, bone, plaster, painted, 22.3 × 16 × 16 cm
Tate, London (loan)
OS 3246

65 *Ohne Titel (Erinnerung an Hjertøya)*, 1936–39
Untitled (Recollection of Hjertøya)
Sculpture. Wood, base, plaster, painted, 70.3 × 19.5 × 14.3 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2107

66 *Dancer*, 1943
Sculpture. Bone? and plaster, painted, 78 × 20 × 15 cm
Private collection, Darmstadt
OS 3050

67 *Ohne Titel (Die allumfassende Plastik)*, 1942–45
Untitled (The All-Embracing Sculpture)
Sculpture. Iron, wood and plaster, painted, 43.6 (with base) × 18.5 × 15.2 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2984

68 No. 5, Waldhausenstrasse, Hanover, around 1926
Photographer: Kate Steinitz
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

69 No. 5, Waldhausenstrasse, Hanover, ground plan showing the main Merzbau rooms.
Sketch: Gwendolen Webster
Gwendolen Webster Archive, Aachen

70 *Merzbau*, Hanover, 1933
Detail views: 1. *Grand Group*, 2. *Blue Window*, 3. *Stairway Entrance Side*
Installation. Paint, paper, cardboard, pasteboard, plaster, glass, mirrors, metal, wood, stone, electric lighting and diverse materials, around 393 × 580 × 460 cm
Destroyed (1943)
Photographer: Wilhelm Redemann
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 1199/19, 21, 20

71 *Merzbau*, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Grotte zur Erinnerung an Molde, 1935
Grotto in Remembrance of Molde
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover OS 1199/30

72 *Merzbau*, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Ohne Titel (Detail mit Madonna), around 1936
Untitled (detail, with Madonna)
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1199/16

73 *Merzbau*, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Sketch of the *Merzbau* reconstruction: floor plan of the principal room
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 1199/5

74 *Merzbau*, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Detail views (apparently from the stairway entrance side), under varied lighting conditions, around 1936
Photographer unknown
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1199/25, 1199/26

75 *Merzbau*, Hanover, destroyed (1943)
Ohne Titel (Grotte mit Kuhhorn), 1932
Untitled (Grotto with Cow Horn)
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1199/9

76 *Haus am Bakken*, plan II (exterior view), 1937–40
Plan of the *Haus am Bakken*, Lysaker, drawn by Ernst Schwitters in 1938 for the local planning department
Pencil on parchment, 50 × 50.4 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2327/3

77 Entrance to the hut on Hjertøya, 2008
Photographer: Adam Lowe and Aicia Guirao
Courtesy of Adam Lowe and Alicia Guirao, Factum Arte, Madrid

78 *Merzbau*, Hanover, reconstruction of the entrance, 1983
Reconstruction by Peter Bissegger
Wood, plaster, polyester, paint, photographs, glass, 393 × 580 × 460 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

79 Relief wall in the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, 1947
Photograph: Ernst Schwitters
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hannover
OS 3659/1

80 Side view of the relief wall in the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, 1947
Relief sculpture, around 300 × 457 cm
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 3659/11

81 Sculptures outside the *Merz Barn*, Elterwater, around 1948
Photographer: Tom Mellor, Cumbria
Courtesy of Mrs. Hannah Mellor, Cumbria

82 *Ohne Titel (Zeitu)*, around 1919
Untitled (Zeitu)
Aphorism. Gouache on paper, 4.1 × 4.9 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 562

83 *Ohne Titel (Mit roter 4)*, 1919
Untitled (With Red 4)
Collage. Crayon, pencil, stamping ink, paper on paper, 17.6 × 15.2 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 507

84 *Zeichnung I 7, allerlei*, 1920
Drawing I 7, All sorts
Misprint on paper, trimmed, 16 × 12.5 cm
Galerie 1900–2000, Paris
OS 743

85 *Ohne Titel (Schwarzer Fleck)*, 1932
Untitled (Black Spot)
Misprint on paper, trimmed, 14 × 11.1 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1856

86 *Ohne Titel (Blau-graue Merzzeichnung)*, 1924–27
Untitled (Blue-Grey Merz Drawing)
Collage. Paper on paper, 18.6 × 15.1 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 1261

87 *MERZ 3. MERZMAPPE, ERSTE MAPPE DES MERZVERLAGES. 6 Lithos*, Blatt 1–6, 1923
MERZ 3. MERZ PORTFOLIO. FIRST PORTFOLIO OF THE MERZ VERLAG. 6 Lithographs, plates 1–6
Print. Six lithographs, each 55.5 × 44.4 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 1194/2–7
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 6

88 *Schwarzes Notizbuch VI*, 1921–23
Black Notebook VI
Notebook. 403 pp., 42.2 × 19.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover

89 *Birke bei Burgwedel*, 1907
Birch Tree near Burgwedel
Watercolor on paper, 21 × 26.8 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Land Niedersachsen, Hanover
OS 2

90 *Z 57 Abstraktion.*, 1918
Z 57 Abstraction
Chalk on paper, 14.3 × 19.3 cm
Whereabouts unknown
OS 318

91 *Abstraktion 148*, 1918
Abstraction 148
Chalk on paper, 16.5 × 12 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 410

92 *Fotogramm mit weißem Herz / Photogramm I*, 1928–31
Photogram with White Heart / Photogram I
Photogram, silver gelatine on paper, 17.5 × 13.5 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett, donation of Marguerite Arp-Hagenbach, Basle
OS 1574

93 *Djupvand med sne*, 1938
Lake Djupvand with Snow
Oil on wood, 54 × 66 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2368

94 *Isbræ under sne*, 1937
Glacier under Snow
Oil on wood, 67 × 56 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2164

95 *Lysaker*, around 1939
Oil on plywood, 85.5 × 78 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2551

96 *Hjertö Kreuz*, 1939
Hjertøya Cross
Oil on wood, 56.3 × 66.3 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2504

97 *Mz. Oslofjord*, 1937
Mz. Oslo Fjord
Oil on plywood, 32.2 × 23.6 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2124

98 *Mistbild.*, 1938
Rubbish Picture
Oil on plywood, 71 × 57.8 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2343

99 *Ohne Titel (März)*, 1937
Untitled (March)
Collage. Paper on paper, 13 × 10.2 cm
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo
OS 2228

100 *Ohne Titel (TERNATIONA)*, 1942
Untitled (TERNATIONA)
Collage. Paper on paper, 51.1 × 40.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy Galerie 1900–2000, Paris
OS 2956

101 *Ohne Titel (Merzbild Alf)*, 1939
Untitled (Merz Picture Alf)
Assemblage. Oil, paper, seashell, feather, coral, leaf, flower, metal ring, match, plastic on plywood, 29.2/28.7 × 28.6 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2475

102 *Prikken paa i en*, 1939
Dot on the i
Collage. Crayon, paper, corrugated cardboard and pasteboard on wood, 75.5 × 91.8 cm
Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris
OS 2560

103 *Ohne Titel (Lysaker)*, 1937
Untitled (Lysaker)
Collage. Snowdrops (pressed), paper on paper, 19.4 × 15 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2229

104 *like an old master*, 1942
Collage. Paper, fabric on canvas, 26.9 × 21.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 2941

105 *Ohne Titel (Bild mit Bahnhofsplan)*, 1943
Untitled (Picture with Railway Station Plan)
Oil on paper on fibreboard, 104 × 74.7 cm
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne
OS 3022

106 *c 60 Blau Elfenbein*, 1946
c 60 Blue Ivory
Collage. Pencil, Oil, paper on paper, 17.2 × 14 cm
Whereabouts unknown
OS 3341

107 *Ohne Titel (Mit zwei gelben Fallschirmen)*, 1945
Untitled (With Two Yellow Parachutes)
Collage. Paper, pasteboard (covered with gauze) on cardboard, 40.6 × 30 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
OS 3208

108 *Ohne Titel (ABLE)*, 1947
Untitled (ABLE)
Collage. Paper, cardboard, photograph on paper, 16.8 × 13.3 cm
Private collection
OS 3526

109 *red spot. (2)*, 1947
Collage. Paint, sand, paper on paper, 11.5 × 8.7 cm
Private collection
OS 3484

110 *bunte Zeitungsfetzen*, 1947
Colorful Newspaper Shreds
Collage. Paper, paint on cardboard, 27.5 × 21.8 cm
Private collection
OS 3493

111 *Ohne Titel (Komposition mit Tube and Hufeisen)*, 1943–45
Untitled (Composition with Tube and Horseshoe)
Assemblage. Tube, tube cap, horseshoe, metal, wood, paper on wood, nailed, 32 × 30.7 cm
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne
OS 2997

112 *Wantees hair*, 1947
Collage. Paper, hair on paper, 21.6 × 17.7 cm
Ann and Robert L. Freedman
OS 3603

113 *c 77 wind swept*, 1946
Collage. Doily, fabric, cardboard, paper on pasteboard, 24.5 × 18.8 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, acquired by means of funding from Flick AG Düsseldorf, Berlin
OS 3349

114 *Young Earnest*, 1944–47
Collage. Paper on book cover, 19.5 × 16.2 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
OS 3095

115 *Ohne Titel (G. STRINDBERG)*, 1946–47
Untitled (G. STRINDBERG)
Collage. Paper on paper, 65.4 × 54.6 cm
Statkraft AS, Oslo
OS 3378

116 *Ohne Titel (Merzzeichnung in Merzzeichnung)*, 1947
Untitled (Merz Drawing in Merz Drawing)
Collage. Paper, photograph on photograph, 15 × 11.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy Mariuccia G. R. Sprenger, Zurich
OS 3500

117 Kurt Schwitters at the easel in Norway, 1936–37
Photographer: Ernst Schwitters
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

118 *Ohne Titel (DIFFICULT)*, 1942–45
Untitled (DIFFICULT)
Collage. Paint, doily, paper on paper, 79.4 × 61 cm
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, gift of The Seymour H. Knox Foundation, Buffalo
OS 2961

119 *Z 71 Der Einsame. (2)*, 1918
Z 71 The Lonely One. (2)
Charcoal on paper, 16.4 × 11 cm
Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne
OS 326

120 *An Anna Blume*, 1920
Poster, 97 × 69.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from a private collection, Hanover

121 *A O*, 1922
Picture poem, from a handwritten letter to Theo van Doesburg, September 13, 1922
Kurt Schwitters Archiv, Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover

122 *Merz 24. Ursonate*, 1932
Typography: Jan Tschichold
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover

123 *Normalbühne Merz*, 1924
Standard Merz Stage
Photograph of the original model
Model stage, wood, dimensions unknown
UWM Manuscript Collection 1, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
OS 1269/1

124 *Normalbühne Merz*, 1924
Standard Merz Stage, scene change
Photograph of the original model
Model stage, wood, dimensions unknown
UWM Manuscript Collection 1, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
OS 1269/2

125 Kurt Schwitters, Kate Steinitz, and Theo van Doesburg, *Die Scheuche. Ein Märchen (Merz 14/15)*, 1925
The Scarecrow. A Fairy Tale (Merz 14/15)
Aposs-verlag, Hanover 1925, 24.5 × 20 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Leihgabe der Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hannover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 27

126 *Merzbild 46 A. Das Kegelbild* 1921
Merz Picture 46 A. The Skittle Picture
Assemblage. Oil, wood, metal, pasteboard on pasteboard, 47 × 35.8 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
OS 781

127 *Merz 4. Banalities*, p. 37, 1923
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 7

128 *Mz 26. 45. Sch.*, 1925–26
Collage. Paper on paper, 14.5 × 10.6 cm
Private collection, Madrid
OS 1320

129 *Merz 11. Typoreklame* (so-called "Pelikan number"), p. 90, 1924
Magazine, 29.1 × 22 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from a private collection, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 20

130 *Merz 4. Banalitäten*, p. 38, 1923
Merz 4. Banalities
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 7

131 *Merz 20. Kurt Schwitters. Katalog*, 1927
Catalogue of the *Great Merz Exhibition*
Magazine, 24.5 × 16 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 44

132 *Merz 8/9 Nasci*, pp. 81–82, 1924
Kurt Schwitters and El Lissitzky
Magazine, 30.3 × 23.3 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 19

133 *Rotterdam*, 1937
Collage. Paper on paper, 15.9 × 19.1 cm
Whereabouts unknown
OS 2233

134 *Städtische Bühnen Hannover, Abonnenten-werbewoche*, 1930
Theater poster subscription tickets for Städtische Bühnen Hannover (Hanover Civic theater)
Poster, 84 × 58.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the Kurt und Ernst Schwitters Stiftung, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, No. 274

135 *Z i 101. Begegnung.*, 1926
Z i 101. Encounter.
Collage. Paper on misprint, trimmed.
16.6 × 13.7 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Sammlung NORD/ LB in der Niedersächsischen Sparkassenstiftung, Hanover; on loan.
OS 1482

136 *Man soll nicht asen mit phrasen*, 1930–31
You Should Beware of Hot Air
Collage. Paper on paper, 36.5 × 28.5 cm
Private ownership, Switzerland, courtesy of Galerie Brusberg, Berlin
OS 1746

137 *Ohne Titel (HOHES LICHT)*, 1933
Untitled (HIGH LIGHT)
From Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart's visitors' book, vol. 2, sheet 6 recto, February 15, 1930, and October 2, 1933
Collage. Paper, crayon and ink on paper, 32 × 28 cm
Museum Wiesbaden, Stiftung Vordemberge-Gildewart, Wiesbaden
OS 1755

138 *Karlsruhe. Ausstellung Dammerstock-Siedlung. Die Gebrauchswohnung*, 1929
Catalogue cover, 21 × 29.8 × 0.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Hanover
Wiesbaden 1990, Nr. 113

139 Ohne Titel (PORTOPFLICHTIGE DIENST-SACHE), 1931–32
Untitled (OFFICIAL MATTER, LIABLE TO POSTAL CHARGES)
Collage. Photographs, paper on paper, 15.9 × 12.4 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, on loan from the collection of the NORD/LB in the Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung, Hanover
OS 1809

140 *Haus Merz*, 1920
Merz House
Architectural model. Wood and metal, nailed, height around 4.5 cm
Destroyed
OS 773

141 *Mz. 410. Irgendsowas.*, 1922
Mz. 410. Something or Other.
Collage. Fabric, paper and feather on card-board, 18.2 × 14.5 cm
Sprengel Museum Hannover, Sammlung Sprengel, Hannover
OS 987

142 EN MORN, 1947
Collage. Tracing paper, paper on paper, 21 × 16.5/17 cm
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OS 3624

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The Schwitters collection at the Sprengel Museum Hannover continues to expand, and anyone conducting research into the life and works of the artist should contact the museum's Kurt Schwitters Archive: http://www.sprengel-museum.com/the_kurt_schwitters_archive/index.htm

Thanks to the untiring efforts of Ian Hunter and Celia Larner of the Littoral Arts Trust, considerable progress has been made in recent years to conserve and develop the site of the Elterwater Merz Barn. More information can be found on the Littoral website: http://www.merzbarn.net/

In 2010 the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Norway set up a center for research into Kurt Schwitters's art in Norway: www.hok.no/?language=en

In 2011 plans will be implemented to conserve the interior of Schwitters's hut on Hjertøya and move it to the Romsdalmuseet, where it will be permanently exhibited in a new building scheduled for completion in 2013. The hut itself will remain on Hjertøya.

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"I play off sense against nonsense.
I prefer nonsense,
but that's a purely personal matter."

KURT SCHWITTERS

Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948) was a key figure of the twentieth-century avant garde, an all-rounder whose diverse activities as an artist, writer, typographer, and performer were unequaled by any of his contemporaries. He is now acknowledged as the master of collage and a pioneer of modern movements, from Pop Art and Fluxus to Conceptual and multimedia art. Though drawn to both Dada and Constructivism, his personal guiding principle remained his one-man movement of *Merz*—a means, as he said, of "establishing relationships, best of all between all the things in the world." *Merz* proved anathema to the Nazis, and from 1937 on Schwitters endured the hardships of exile, first in Norway and then in England, where he died in 1948.

This overview of Schwitters's life and work sheds fresh light on his art, his writings, and his commercial ventures. It also offers a new perspective on the *Merzbau*, the monumental interior he referred to as his "life's work."

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